

"A series that is leading the way for writers of weird fiction... we eagerly await more neo-Lovecraftian tales of terrifying cosmic horror."

STARBURST MAGAZINE

BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 4

SEVENTEEN NEW TALES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR

EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

ALSO EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI:

Black Wings Of Cthulhu
Black Wings Of Cthulhu 2
Black Wings Of Cthulhu 3

The Madness Of Cthulhu
The Madness Of Cthulhu 2

BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 4

SEVENTEEN NEW TALES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR

EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

TITAN BOOKS

Black Wings of Cthulhu 4
Print edition ISBN: 9781783295739
E-book edition ISBN: 9781783295746

Published by Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark St, London SE1 0UP

First Titan edition: March 2016
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Previously published in February 2015 by PS Publishing Ltd. by arrangement with the authors. All rights reserved by the authors. The rights of each contributor to be identified as Author of their Work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Copyright © 2015, 2016 by the individual contributors

Introduction Copyright © 2015, 2016 by S. T. Joshi
Cover Art Copyright © 2016 by Gregory Nemec
With thanks to PS Publishing

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Did you enjoy this book? We love to hear from our readers.
Please email us at readerfeedback@titanemail.com or write to us at Reader Feedback at the above address.

To receive advance information, news, competitions, and exclusive offers online, please sign up for the Titan newsletter on our website

WWW.TITANBOOKS.COM

CONTENTS

Cover

Also by S. T. Joshi

Title Page

Copyright

Epigraph

Introduction

S. T. Joshi

Artifact

Fred Chappell

Half Lost in Shadow

W. H. Pugmire

The Rasping Absence

Richard Gavin

Black Ships Seen South of Heaven

Caitlín R. Kiernan

The Dark Sea Within

Jason V Brock

Sealed by the Moon

Gary Fry

Broken Sleep

Cody Goodfellow

A Prism of Darkness

Darrell Schweitzer

Night of the Piper

Ann K. Schwader

We Are Made of Stars

Jonathan Thomas

Trophy

Melanie Tem

Contact

John Pelan and Stephen Mark Rainey

Cult of the Dead

Lois H. Gresh

Dark Redeemer

Will Murray

In the Event of Death

Simon Strantzas

Revival

Stephen Woodworth

The Wall of Asshur-sin

Donald Tyson

Fear Lurks Atop Tempest Mount

Charles Lovecraft

“The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.”

H. P. LOVECRAFT,
“SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE”

Introduction

IF ANYTHING HAS BECOME EVIDENT IN THE FIRST three volumes of the *Black Wings* series, it is that the Lovecraftian idiom is endlessly malleable, and suited to a variety of genres and subgenres. H. P. Lovecraft, although a strong proponent of what he called “weird fiction,” himself spanned a surprisingly wide spectrum of genres in his own brief career, starting out as a writer of relatively conventional tales of the macabre and gradually expanding his scope to embrace the literature of cosmicism—a distinctive fusion of science fiction and horror that has become his signature contribution to the field. Today, we can find Lovecraftian elements in stories ranging from hard-boiled crime to pure fantasy, and this volume displays the extent to which motifs, themes, and imagery from Lovecraft’s tales can infiltrate tales that would otherwise have little relationship to one another.

One of the central aspects of the Lovecraftian tale, however, is the quest for knowledge, especially knowledge of ancient cultures and objects. Lovecraft himself was focused on this theme because it allowed him to broach the “conflict with time” that he claimed was one of the most vital motivating factors in his own imagination. For Lovecraft, cosmicism was not only spatial but temporal; and the suggestion of immense gulfs of time beyond and behind the fundamentally brief span of human history was a powerful tool for the fostering of his trope of cosmic insignificance. In this volume, the diverse explorers in Fred Chappell’s “Artifact,” Richard Gavin’s “The Rasping Absence,” Lois H. Gresh’s “Cult of the Dead,” Ann K. Schwader’s “Night of the Piper,” and Donald Tyson’s “The Wall of Asshur-sin” find more than they bargain for as they probe the remote corners of the earth.

The cosmicism of time extends both into the past and into the future. Several writers, perhaps taking their cue from Darrell Schweitzer’s recent anthology *Cthulhu’s Reign*, have speculated on the dire consequences that would result if the Lovecraftian “gods” (really alien entities from remote

corners of the universe) were to become dominant on the earth. Thus we have Caitlín R. Kiernan's grim but cosmic "Black Ships Seen South of Heaven," Cody Goodfellow's disturbing "Broken Sleep," and Melanie Tem's cheerless and harrowing "Trophy." Perhaps Will Murray's tale of governmental espionage, "Dark Redeemer," ought to be considered in this light. John Pelan and Stephen Mark Rainey transport us to outer space in their science fiction/horror hybrid "Contact."

The sense of place was all-important to Lovecraft, because he himself recognised how much his own character and predilections depended upon the New England topography and history that gave him birth. W. H. Pugmire has made a specialty in evoking the constellation of Lovecraftian cities in New England, and "Half Lost in Shadow," a perfumed prose-poem set in Kingsport, is no different. Jonathan Thomas uses Lovecraft's (and his own) native city of Providence, Rhode Island, as the setting for the unnerving tale "We Are Made of Stars." Topography figures in a very different sense as Jason V Brock evokes mediaeval Prague in "The Dark Sea Within," while Gary Fry finds weirdness in the British countryside in "Sealed by the Moon."

The Lovecraftian book—nothing less, indeed, than the iconic *Necronomicon*—is the basis for Darrell Schweitzer's pungent vignette "A Prism of Darkness." Lovecraftian "gods" lurk in the background of Stephen Woodworth's "Revival," and the dreams that were so essential to the igniting of Lovecraft's own imagination are the focus of Simon Strantzas's "In the Event of Death."

The final contribution to this book calls for especial notice. We are in the midst of a renaissance of weird poetry, and much of the credit is owed to Lovecraft. He himself was only a middling poet, but his weird verse—notably the sonnet-cycle *Fungi from Yuggoth*—has inspired generations of poets who came in his wake. In our time, such skilled versifiers as Ann K. Schwader, Wade German, and Leigh Blackmore have found the Lovecraftian poetic idiom a felicitous means for expressing their own visions of awe and terror, and Charles Lovecraft, in "Fear Lurks Atop Tempest Mount," has done the same. His P'rea Press seeks to preserve the centuries-long tradition of weird verse, and his own contributions to the form are worthy of our appreciation as well.

S. T. Joshi

Artifact

FRED CHAPPELL

Fred Chappell is a distinguished American novelist and poet who has written extensively in the vein of weird and Lovecraftian fiction. His novel Dagon (Harcourt, 1968) was named the best foreign-language book by the Académie Française, and his story collection More Shapes Than One (St. Martin's Press, 1991) contains several Lovecraftian narratives, including "The Adder" and "Weird Tales." His novella The Lodger (Necronomicon Press, 1993) won the World Fantasy Award. An omnibus of his weird work appeared in Centipede Press's Masters of the Weird Tale series in 2014.

1.

“THIS ARTIFACT IS INCOMPLETE.”

Professor Henrik Olsen leaned forward over the table of our booth and tapped the photograph with his table fork.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

He produced a small, black leather sleeve from his jacket pocket, slid out a magnifier, and handed it to me. “See here on this side? The edge is jagged. It has been broken off.”

I turned the photo about. “You may be right.”

“I am.” He stared at me for a moment with his cool gray eyes. His tone was brisk. Olsen was an energetic, shortish man with a sharply tapered white beard and an eager attitude. His demeanor reminded me of a real estate developer I had known who seemed always to feel he was on the verge on closing a grandly lucrative deal on a project no one else had yet got wind of.

“You’re the expert,” I said.

He pointed again. “Here on the left side, the lioness thrusts forward with bared fangs, as if to attack, But then her form flowing backward morphs into abstraction. We may read these curlicues as hackles of fur along her spine, or as storm clouds or sea waves, symbols to suggest the harsher powers of nature. Then, tucked into the abstraction here and there, are other motifs or attributes.”

I put my speculation timidly: “I thought I saw something a little like an owl.”

He leaned back in his seat and beamed, as if I were a student who had contributed a bright remark in seminar. “That would be correct. The owl is important. There are astronomical symbols too. You recorded the dimensions of the piece. Seven and one-half centimeters long, averaging three wide. Weight four grams. It’s a wonder the carver was able to crowd so much detail into so small a space.”

“I have been poring over it, but it is mysterious.”

“Let us gather our provender to us,” he said. “I hope you will forgive me for ordering for us previously. I thought to save time.” He raised his hand to signal one of the tall blonde servers. The staff here at the place he had called The Low Dive evidently knew him well.

When I had suggested we lunch at the Queen City country club, he demurred. “Anytime I go there, some nice lady spots me and insists that I come to her house to appraise some gizmo she picked up at a yard sale. She’s always convinced that it is ‘ancient Egyptian.’ At the Low Dive, no one speaks of ancient Egypt. The bison burgers are hefty and the waitresses are tall blondes with soccer ambitions.”

“You must be describing Lowe’s Diner on South Main.”

“Yes. If we must be prosaic.” He had hung up.

So here we were, seated in a booth to which there now arrived a young lady of Valkyrie proportions bearing two misted, foaming steins. She smiled at me when she asked, “What kind of dressing on your salad?”

“I like the Italian, but the others are okay too,” Olsen said.

“Italian will do.”

He thanked the girl, calling her Olga, and we touched steins. “Highlander Ale. Local brew.”

“What else can you tell me?”

He leaned and drew his finger along the length of the object. “If it were not broken, the design would repeat in reverse from this midpoint. It has to be symmetrical to serve its purpose.”

“Purpose?”

“It is an object employed by the priest, or the priestess, in performing the rites. I call it an Opener, but that’s just my personal term. It would be rejected by most other archaeologists.”

“Is that why they call you Professor Nut at the college?” I asked. “By the way, I like this ale.”

“You’ll like the burger too. Yes, Professor Nut. And Prof Screwloose and Doctor Daffy, and so forth. I don’t mind. My credentials are sound, my publications well documented, and my on-site researches have been of recognized value. Modesty prevents my continuing in this vein.” His grin was fleeting but engaging. He seemed to enjoy his reputation for eccentricity and I suspected that he encouraged it.

“I attended one of the lectures you gave over at Hillman. You talked about the persistence of very ancient family lines and their distribution around the world. You said this research had drawn you to Queen City, North Carolina, where experts in ancient archaeology do not often alight. You didn’t say which particular families drew your interest.”

“If I mention the clan who call themselves the Choneys, would you be surprised?”

“Not really. Folks have been speculating about them ever since I can remember.”

Olga fetched salads and Olsen pitched into his immediately, munching rapidly. I could not help thinking of a billy goat wearing a tweed jacket and sporting a red bow tie, having at his crabgrass and horse nettles. The professor’s delta of white beard attracted the image irresistibly.

“Would you be surprised if I told you I thought there might be some connection between the Choneys and the artifact in your photo?”

I lifted my stein but set it down without a sip. “Yes. Very surprised. I took this ritual object, as you call it, to be very old.”

He nodded, munched, and pushed aside his empty salad plate. “If it is genuine, I would classify it as Babylonian and date it at 1900 BCE, give or take a few centuries.”

“You think it may be a fake?”

“Most small objects floating single about the world are reproductions. But I have never seen this exact design before, so a forger would have less motive than normal to produce it. I can probably tell when I see the Opener itself and not the picture. We are fortunate that the thing is broken. If it were complete, I might be alarmed.”

“My client would not be pleased to think I was walking around with the real thing in my pocket.”

“Your client?”

“I’d prefer not to name him at this point.”

“Your client is Robert Pasterby the third. Most of those who know him call him Robbie. I’ve met him at a library reception at Hillman. He’s on the board of governors of the college. Reputed to be the wealthiest man in Windsor County. His family is an old one and his landholdings are extensive.”

“Is he a subject of your research?”

“In regard to his connection with the Choneys, yes. And now with the artifact. I need to know all you can tell me. I am not of a prying nature, except in my scientific capacities, but this is an important matter. Your client may be in danger.”

“How so?”

“If you will tell me how you—or he—came by it, I can explain clearly. Otherwise, my explanation will be a muddle. It has to do with an intra-continuum passageway.”

The sandwiches were placed before us, along with a fresh stein for Olsen. Mine was still half full. He went at his burger with fangs bared; he would do a lioness proud, I thought.

“I’ll have to be circumspect,” I said. “I am the Pasterby family solicitor. So were my father and my grandfather. He is my friend as well as my client.”

“Is he a warm personal friend?”

“No, but our relationship extends beyond business matters.”

He nodded, as if he had foreseen my answer.

“The family papers have not been put in order since the death of Robbie’s father. He commissioned me to go through all the family records since the time of his grandfather. In doing so, I found a strange anomaly—”

I broke off, trying to think how to get my part of the story straight. I had not thought I would have to provide a detailed narrative and I wondered how much I was at liberty to say. My last meeting with Robbie had involved confidential information.

2.

THAT MEETING HAD TAKEN PLACE ON THURSDAY, SIX days past, mid-afternoon, in his handsome office on the second floor of the Pasterby Building on Broad Street. This ruddy brick structure with its tall windows, had been converted some thirty years ago from a private dwelling to house the Pasterby enterprises in brokerage and realty and subsidiary ventures. Despite its capacious size, this room was cozy. An early December wind nudged the windows, emphasizing that quality.

Robbie pushed his magisterial chair back from his neatly ordered mahogany desk and smiled. "How goes the impossible project?" His tone was commiserating and condescending at the same time. He was unaware of the condescension. The Pasterbys had been landed gentry for a long time and, though his manner was casual, Robbie's bearing displayed a patrician cast. Something in his features hinted at dissipation, a visual quality something like the craqueleur in noble ancestral portraits.

I was accustomed to his manner, so ingrained that it would probably be unnoticed by those who had not known him for a long period. We had been school chums many a year past and my father and grandfather had served as the Pasterbys' private solicitors, so I had opportunity to observe changes in the men. The general demeanor had not altered in three generations. Their tacit attitude was that they were Pasterbys and the rest of us were out of the running. One got used to the attitude or did not. I found it both amusing and mildly annoying.

So the firm of Leveret and Leveret stood as family retainers in the old-fashioned sense, protecting the interests and keeping the secrets of the clan faithfully and scrupulously. I am Leveret and Leveret; that is, I am George Leveret, Jr., the sole remaining partner after the death of my father seven years ago. I keep the old name for the firm out of affection and respect for our twenty-one years of lawyering together and also in acknowledgment that the respectable citizens of Queen City do not like even slight changes in long-established institutions. Leverets go back a long way, as far as the

Pasterbys, if one credits the genealogies offered on both sides. I have lately broadened the activities of the firm to include clients and corporations new to the area. Robbie was not entirely pleased with this development but seemed to think that if I had to do business with a parvenu class, that was but another sign of the degeneracy of our time.

“The impossible project?” I said. I patted the briefcase I held in my lap, then set it beside my chair. “Two steps forward and one back—on a good day. But the job becomes a little more likely. I’ve gone through the boring stuff first, property deeds, promissory notes, land survey carts, and so forth. Your father was cavalier in the matter of documents. My secretary is gathering all that up and you will receive it in bits and pieces, large bits and huge pieces, over the next two months. Quite a barrage of paper you fired at me.”

“I shudder to think.”

“Now I’m getting into the more interesting pages. One box contains journals your grandfather kept. Two are in a private code and one of those I’ve managed to decipher, a record of his gambling practices. Quite the poker player was Robert Axelrod Pasterby.”

“Cards and horses, favorite family failings.”

“He didn’t fail too often. If I read his ciphers correctly, he made a few of his poker friends feel the breeze cool upon their nether parts.”

“I’ve heard he was aggressive. Some folks claimed to be a little afraid of him, but to me he was Granddad. I loved it when he would pay me the least attention. When I was a kid no one spoke of his card-playing.”

“One of the journals is not in code. It seems to be a record of his dreams. That surprises me.”

Robbie smiled, as if to show a kindly tolerance for the foibles of his forebear. “We Pasterbys are supposed to be hardheaded men of business, but we have our quirks, just as others do. Granddad had a superstitious streak. I’ve heard that numerology and all that kind of thing influenced his gambling habits.”

“And then I came across a different puzzle. There is another box covered in dark blue velvet. It is in your second lockbox in the vault at First National.”

“Yes.”

“It has a trifling little brass lock I opened with a paper clip. Seth Holloway was with me, of course. One of the bank personnel has to be present when anyone besides the owner is in the vault with the lockboxes.”

“I know what you’re speaking of,” he said. “We called it Aunt Cassie’s Fit. My grand-uncle Harold gave Aunt Cassie a lot of rather expensive jewels. He would surprise her at odd times, not at Christmas or birthdays or anniversaries. One random day he would place a little jewel case by her dinner plate and she would open it to find a necklace or string of pearls—”

“Or an emerald or blood ruby.”

“Oh yes. She was proud of her ‘loot,’ as she called this trove of baubles. No one knew how she finally figured out that every one of these sparklers commemorated an amorous indiscretion by Uncle Harold. They were stopping over at our house at the time and she became violently enraged. She snatched up the box she had ordered made for her treasures and went out onto the porch and flung them away into the front yard just at dark. A double or triple handful. That’s the family story, anyhow.”

“She must have been seriously angry.”

“Angry enough to separate from her husband and take up with some fellow over in Hydesville none of our family had ever heard of.”

“Were all the jewels recovered?”

“Yes. But it took a long time. Years. The children, the servants, everyone kept looking. They found them all. Anyhow, they found everything that matched the inventory my granduncle had drawn up for his own use.”

I brought a cardboard folder from my briefcase and laid it on the desk. “His inventory is included among your papers. But there is one piece unaccounted for.” I pushed the folder toward him. “Robbie, have you seen this object before?”

When he opened the cover his face changed instantly. Surprise and puzzlement showed in his expression. Also chagrin. His complexion paled slightly and he drew a quick intake of breath.

At last he said, “I recognize it. I don’t know whether I’ve seen it or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I must have seen it when I was very young, but when I try to capture the memory, it goes away. It goes dark. I was supposed to see it, but I’m not sure that I did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What time is it?” He looked at the tall grandfather with the old-fashioned pendulum standing in the corner. “Quarter of five. What the hell, let’s have a drink.” He pushed back his chair and went to the big mahogany sideboard with its array of decanters and glasses. “This calls for Scotch.” He poured three fingers into two etched glasses and brought one to me.

“You seem alarmed.”

He paced about before sitting again at his desk. He raised his glass. “Cheers.” His voice was glum.

“Cheers.”

He sighed. “I’m not as superstitious as Granddad and I do not record my dreams. Fact is, I hardly ever remember them. When I wake up at six-thirty I may be able to recall a detail or two, but I can’t put them together. By breakfast time they’re gone from my mind for good.”

“The photo reminded you of something.”

He placed his hand on the folder and took a thoughtful sip of whisky. “But occasionally over the years I keep having one dream. It must have come to me a dozen or so times. It is very real—and yet it is not real at all.

“In this dream I am in the woods. It is not nighttime, but it is very dark. A storm is gathering. I can feel the air growing cooler and hear a scrabbling all around me in the weeds and underbrush. It sounds like squirrels playing about, but I don’t see them. Lots of squirrels. The sound grows louder and louder.”

“That would be frightening. How old are you in this dream?”

He blinked. “I never thought. I’ve always taken for granted that I’m the same age as when I’m dreaming. But now that you ask, I must be quite young because everything looks large. The trees are extremely tall and most of the bushes are taller than I am. But I am more bewildered than frightened at this point. I have to keep walking, or trotting, because I need to get out of the woods. I am supposed to be somewhere, in a certain place.”

“You have to reach a goal?”

“Yes. No. Not exactly. There is a place outside these woods where I’m supposed to be. But it is hard to get there because the ground begins to slope and I have to climb uphill. Hard going. The scrabbling sound grows louder and the sky is getting darker.”

“You say you are bewildered. I would be scared.”

“Then I break free of this grove and there is an open space before me, a big grassy hill with some sort of building at the top.”

“What does it look like?”

“Large. White, I think. It is indistinct. And between me and the structure, whatever it is, stands a statue of a man. Tall and dark and commanding. Then I know that here is the place I’m supposed to be so that I can receive the delivery.”

“Delivery?”

“Something to be given to me. Handed over. Or spoken to me. A message or maybe a thing. I don’t know.”

“Thing? An object of some sort?”

“If I can reach the statue, I’ll know what it is. But that doesn’t happen.”

“Why?”

“Before I get there, when I’m still about fifteen feet away, the statue bursts into flame.”

“Then?”

“It falls to the ground and the fires go out and there is a woman beside it with a cloak around her, flapping in the wind. Her cloak looks like big black wings. I keep on till I reach the fallen statue.”

He paused for a long moment and took a bracing dosage of liquor.

We sat silent until I said, “But this sounds familiar, Robbie. Wasn’t your grandfather struck by lightning in the front lawn of the house? Doesn’t the lawn slope down into the woods there? It’s still pretty much the same as it was in those days. Isn’t his death something you might have witnessed? How old were you when he died?”

“About seven, I think.”

“So this would have taken place fifty years ago. When did this dream begin occurring?”

“I can’t be sure. Maybe twenty years back.”

“If you witnessed his death when you were so young, you would have lost a lot of the details. You wouldn’t want to remember too clearly what took place.”

“Maybe.” He thought. “But that’s not the end of the dream. I ran to the figure and leaned over and looked. It was not Granddad. It was a statue with most of the face blasted away. The statue was toppled over backward. The

face would have been looking at the sky. It was a naked man carved from some kind of black stone, holding a white key in the left hand.”

“Key? Would that be the artifact in the photo?”

“Yes.” He took it up again. “This is it. But I didn’t really see it in the hand of the statue. I just saw something white and thought it must be a key.”

“What kind of key? What did it open?”

He frowned. “And then the winged woman in the cloak said, ‘*Take it up. Bear it away. Now it is with you.*’ But when I reach for it, the dream ends. Each time at that point. And that’s all.”

“Do you grasp the object? Or touch it?”

“I don’t think so.”

I said, “Did you notice that you changed the tense at the last part of your story?”

The cool half smile. “Are you suggesting that I watch my grammar?”

“Perhaps that particular part is most vivid, most urgent in your mind”

“Yes. Perhaps.” He turned the picture upside down and gazed. Then he placed it in the folder and closed the cover. “But I’ve never seen the actual object. How could it get in with the jewelry?”

“I don’t know. I came to ask if I could show this photograph to Professor Olsen. If it really is ancient mid-eastern, he might be able to tell us something.”

He sighed. “I don’t see how that could hurt. I want to see the thing first myself.”

“Of course. And if I find related documents, would it be all right to run them by him?”

“Well—as long as they are not extremely personal. Love letters and that sort of thing.”

“I promise not to share the amorous intimacies of Robert Axelrod Pasterby Number One.”

“See that you don’t. We wouldn’t want the learned professor to die of shock.” He took up the folder, paused, and then passed it over.

“I’ll bring the artifact to your office tomorrow. Is there anything else in that motley heap you’d like to see?”

“Not that I know of. But don’t leave till you finish your drink.”

“I won’t,” I said and kept my promise.

3.

THE HANDSOME AND FORMIDABLE OLGA WAS clearing our table and proffering dessert menus. Olsen said, "I hear good things about the key lime pie. I only take coffee for dessert, but I pass the tip along."

"Thinking to assert myself, I'll take the pie," I said.

Olga smiled and departed.

"You were going to trace Pasterby's connection with the Opener," Olsen said. "Have you decided what is permissible for me to know? I have no personal interest, except as I am concerned with the safety of the community."

"You spoke of danger. Is it so grave as that?"

"Yes."

"Well, it doesn't make a lot of sense to me." After this disclaimer, I unfolded the narrative I had pieced together about the appearance of the artifact amid Aunt Cassie's cache and the recognition of it by Robbie. I felt free now to relate his dream of the dark trek through the woods, the statue that caught fire, and of the cloaked or winged woman and her baffling words. "If it were more a recollection than a dream, we could imagine that the artifact was found on the lawn by one of the kids and put in with the jewelry by mistake."

He repeated the phrases: "Take it up. Bear it away. Now it is yours ... Is that correct?"

"Those are the words he says the woman speaks."

"What did she look like? Was she familiar to him?"

"I don't think he knows. He was very young in the dream, the same age then as he was when his grandfather died."

"Struck by lightning with the woman in attendance."

"She was present. I don't know that she was in attendance."

"I now request that you go through the Pasterby records and other papers as quickly as possible."

"Well, there's a fair amount—"

My pie was placed before me. Accompanying Olsen's coffee was a shot glass of dark liquid that he poured into his cup.

"This is an urgent matter," Olsen said. He gave me a keen look. "The woman in his dream who stood over his grandfather when he was killed by the blast was undoubtedly Leetha Choney."

"Not possible. Leetha Choney is Robbie's housemaid at the present time."

"That name, Choney, is a corruption from Italian, something like Braccione or Guiccioni. Probably Sicilian in its recent forms. But the Choney line originated in the mid-east, probably in ancient Sumer, and has spread widely in eastern and middle Europe and has set up habitation latterly in the U.S. and Mexico. They are a private clan, keeping to themselves, except in circumstances where they attach in a speciously dependent role to some local landowning dynasty. The local populace thinks of them as 'gypsies' because that term has no real definition."

"That is the case in Queen City," I said.

"Well, now for one of Professor Nut's wild hypotheses." Olsen smiled, a trace of ruefulness in his expression. "I believe I have been able to trace this particular family branch back to the most ancient times. Not this singular Choney branch itself, but the large kinship or unorganized clanship to which it belongs. They are numerous and the situations into which they fit themselves are similar from place to place. In their relationship to prominent families, they fulfill customary roles."

"Roles?"

"I can't say precisely what these are, but they are important in establishing a connection with their ancient gods."

"Ancient—"

"If you can, please bear with poor, demented Doctor Goofy for a few minutes. My reading of an immense amount of historical evidence suggests that only a few very isolated cultures ever die out completely. Most of them transform, absorbed into later national and tribal cultures. Though amalgamated with these larger communities, they never entirely lose their peculiar characters. These elder remnant cultures are carried from one place to another over the millennia by a certain few clans or families. The Choneys are still linked with one of the oldest of civilizations and its customs."

“This is not easy for me to conceive,” I objected. “I have had experience in trying to track down scattered family members in regard to legacies of property and money. Trying to find a grandnephew once removed is a tedious and sometimes impossible task. I don’t see how anyone could trace a family line over four thousand years.”

“You would be looking for a single individual, trying to find primary connections. I need only to find certain large patterns of relationship. Within these large patterns are subsets. I work through these until I come across the most fitting set of circumstances. Then I locate primary subjects, the living descendants of the most ancient lines, and observe what I can. One of the distinctive patterns is that an outsider woman of strong will and mysterious background is insinuated into a respectable family and gains power within it and, finally, over it.”

I pushed away my plate and settled back in the booth. “That particular situation is well known in the South. Do you think it applies here?”

In antebellum days and for some decades following, a plantation owner would occasionally take one of the female slaves as concubine. If the relationship were openly known, this woman would gain real, though illegal, authority. She would give orders to the other slaves, male and female, and become the reigning mistress of the household. The owner’s wife might then desert the farm and retreat to the safety of her own family. Sometimes she would sue for divorce. But the usual case was that the legitimate wife would live on at the plantation and fade away as a personality, ruled harshly by her brutal husband and his shameless mistress. When the husband died, the legal tangles were so complicated they could never be resolved, especially if the slave mistress had borne children by the husband. Without clear property rights declared, the farmlands fell into disrepair, then into ruin, and became easy prey for speculators. Dozen of once-substantial family farms degenerated into marshes and briar patches.

So this arrangement is disapproved by society. It occasions head-shaking and tongue-wagging and in tacit broad recognition that wrong has been done. But the drama is so embedded in the history of the region that it has been accepted, though with glum silence and averted gaze.

“The situation is not identical with that of Grandfather Pasterby,” Olsen admitted. “Slavery was long gone when the old man came into possession of his holdings. But his position was the same as an old-time slave owner,

and institutional habits hang on. The Choneys may not be so economically dependent upon the Pasterbys as they seem to be. I believe they are not, but at first they would have been, for the pattern is set. Each new generation produces a new Robert Pasterby who is supplied by the Choneys with a new Leetha.”

“There are documents to support this history,” I said.

“Some day I must look at them. But now the duty lies with you. If you would please go through as many of them as you can over the weekend, perhaps you could give me an informal report, or at least a sketchy description, on Monday. Please look particularly for any financial arrangement between the two families in which one has gone back on his word and betrayed the other. If we can find that out, we may have gained some advantage. The danger is more imminent than you realize.”

“From what quarter does this danger come?”

“From ancient Babylon.”

His expression told me that I must not laugh. But I could not help smiling. “Is this more Professor Nuttery?”

“Yes.” He drew an envelope from his side pocket. “Here are a couple of offprints of articles I wrote that the pedantic—excuse me, *respectable*—journals never would publish. The information is solid and I believe my theories are equally solid. If you add them to your already ponderous reading assignment, we may save time—and even lives.”

I took them from him. “Do my best,” I said, “as soon as I can.”

“Be careful. Now you are involved.”

4.

I PHOTOCOPIED THE PASTERBY DOCUMENTS FOR MY research, secured the originals in the office safe, and carried the copies to my house for the weekend. To pay them closest attention from Friday until meeting with Olsen on Monday, I desired the quiet comfort of my home.

My pair of housekeepers had cleaned and ordered the rooms; they were spotless and cheerful. They had stocked my larder following my list and I had attended to the liquorous necessities. My customary loneliness was to be alleviated by my labors.

I began on Friday afternoon almost as soon as I got home.

Pasterby Number One was the main subject of my focus. His son, the second Robert, was not an entirely colorless person, but he stood well within the long, dark shadow of his parent. He was a competent businessman, though he lacked a strong aggressive nature. Nor did he possess his own son's, Robbie's, smiling insouciance and gift of chat. He once described himself as "a hyphen between Robert I and Robert III." He even allowed the daughter of his father's Leetha Choney to be installed in his own household. Thinking upon the situation, I came to believe that this arrangement would have been at the father's insistence. Following the first, the two latter Leethas were darksome legacies.

I was beginning to form an idea of the general shape of this self-involved clan. There was a thick, twine-bound packet of papers recording business transactions with Rast Choney, Leetha's father. Rast worked in metals, tin, brass, and silver. These skills probably suggested the common notion that he was a gypsy. But he was more than an itinerant tinker; his financial dealings with Pasterby were complex, sometimes hard for me to follow. But at some point he had become aggrieved and the records broke off inconclusively.

I spent only a little time on these financial affairs. I needed, I thought, to look into the more personal pages the grandfather had penned. When I unloaded the Xeroxes from my briefcase, Olsen's articles slid out. One was

“Probabilities of Disruption of Linearities and Symmetry in Parallel Space-Time Continua,” an offprint from *Physico-Philosophical Papers*, a journal published, according to the acknowledgment note, at Nordberg University in Uppsala. The *P-P Papers* was not a prestigious publication, I surmised, so this would not be one of Olsen’s more highly regarded articles, like those published in *Journal of American Oriental Society* and *Revue d’Assyriologie*. The biographical headnote listed these among his other credits in a rather defensive manner.

The second paper was a résumé of recent historical research about the resurgence of an ancient Lilith cult in Goray, Poland, and the disastrous aftermath. I glanced through it, laid it aside, and went back to the first, hoping to gain some notion of what Olsen wanted me to look for. I began tentatively.

A fair amount of its substance was already familiar to me, for instance, the hypothesis of unbroken genealogical lines originating in Sumer, Akkad, Elam, and the neighboring territories. And here again was his notion of continually recurring patterns of landowner-dependent relationship. His speculations about parallel time continua in which it was possible for ancient Babylon and our contemporary universe to exist simultaneously with several levels of energy-barrier dividing them he had partially outlined in the lecture I had attended at Hillman. In this article he went further, to extrapolate on what might happen if the science of the ancient priests and geometers happened at some points to become congruent with our contemporary scientific discoveries so that the barriers between the continua could be breached.

The most fanciful aspect of this possibility he relegated to a footnote: “One might wonder what would happened in our contemporary society if there suddenly appeared Hanbi, king of the wind-demons, or Ninurta, prince of the Underworld, or Bine his gatekeeper, or Lilit, bringer of death.” This scenario was tucked away in a note overloaded with source references; Olsen seemed to want to camouflage it with apparatus.

He followed the same strategy again in a later passage, answering an imagined objection that these elder gods and occult forces would have no motive to try to force their ways through the gates of twentieth-century civilization. “Some of the gods, as they were conceived, were by nature inimical to humankind and existed only for the purpose of doing it harm.”

And again: “It was in character for these gods to extend their domains, to gain territories physical and psychical. They did not reason; they acted out of blind tropisms.”

Olsen’s footnotes embodied the heart of his thesis; the article itself was couched in the usual academic jargon, opacity overlying opacity, festooned with quotations in German, French, and ancient Semitic languages. As I read along, I was uncertain how seriously he intended his readers to accept his exotic hypotheses. Even though he supplied an amount of mathematical reasoning unusual in an archeological article, the parallel-universe notion seemed far-fetched. It recalled to me some of the happy hours of youth when I read devotedly through the pages of Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Vance, and other futurists who dreamed sidewise about the shape of things to come.

On the last page, below the text, the professor had scribbled a personal note to me: “Please do not dismiss these suggestions from consideration. I have evidence that the continua barriers are in danger of being compromised. I repeat—your friend Pasterby may be in danger, along with those connected with him. I am utterly serious. H. O.”

If I understood Olsen’s warning as he intended, I must keep alert for similarities, any close parallels, between occurrences separated in time. The household situations of the three Roberts were one example, each of them closely associated with the Choney family that lived on a plot of ground bordering the eastern part of the estate. And each paterfamilias had installed, or allowed to be installed, succeeding Choney daughters as live-in maids. Here were parallels of a large pattern, but the similarities were general and would have occurred in other landowner families also. A more particular event or incident must find its parallel for Olsen’s theories to be strengthened.

* * *

With these thoughts not very clearly in mind, I turned to the grandfather’s dream journal. In my capacities as appraiser and curator of family papers I have read through a number of such chronicles. The recording of dreams used to be a common practice within a society thoroughly self-involved and with large amounts of leisure time to dispose of.

The dream-journal of Robbie's grandfather followed the general masculine pattern. The entries were brief and mostly devoid of commentary. Most of the subject matter was ordinary stuff, erotic visions or scenarios of flight and pursuit or public embarrassments. But one dream was recurrent and was noted no fewer than a dozen times.

A typical entry read like the first: "On caravan in a desert land headed toward mtn. Cant tell who is with me. Come to mtn & climb up to cave. Big grave mound or the like. Crawl over and come to steps..."

I made notes on these repeated fragments and was able to piece out a fairly coherent narrative. The grandfather in his dream is engaged in a quest for something he cannot name. In a cave mouth near the top of a mountain in an unknown land is a great hall or other immense space with a black marble table or altar. This shadowy space is ringed with robed and hooded presences, mute and motionless. Upon the marble slab is a pale trough-like vessel, probably carved from alabaster. Inside it lies an object that Pasterby's dream-self must grasp and bring away to his actual home, his mansion in Queen City, North Carolina. He does not wish to do so but is compelled by the force of another's will. He stretches his hand toward the vessel—and then awakes. He experiences upon waking a feeling of acute disappointment.

All the accounts of this recurrent dream were pretty much the same until a final one. The last narrative broke off just where the others did, but Pasterby recorded for the first and only time the events that followed upon his awaking.

He woke shouting loudly in terror. Leetha, who was taller than she normally stood, watched him from the foot of the bed with her calm, almond-shaped eyes. Her eyes were enlarged.

He was overcome with anxiety. Where was the object? This last time he had actually laid his hand upon it and brought it away. But his hand is empty. His face is painful. There was a fiery, orange-white, sudden explosion when he grasped the artifact. He must have been singed.

Olsen had told me to look for close similarities, for events that corresponded to one another in outline, if not in detail. I recognized the recurrent dream of his grandfather as the same one Robbie had experienced. The terms were different: The grandfather's dream took place in an unknown desert land while Robbie's took place upon his home estate. But

the narrative was the same: a quest for an object in a dangerous situation, the urgency of the mission, the climactic explosion, and the powerful sense of loss upon awakening.

Olsen had written in his essay a scientific rationale of how the barriers between the Babylonian continuum and our own might break down. I could not follow the reasoning. If **L**, the Lorentz group of space-time coordinates, is transformed by the quantum set of vectors, **H**, a reciprocity is established, so that the continua may mesh, though different energy-level states would cause small but powerful local explosions.

The symmetry that had to be established between the continua was the joining of the halves of the artifact. Somewhere on the grounds of the Pasterby estate lay the missing piece. It came to me now that it would be the office of Leetha to join the parts. The mechanics of the event I would never comprehend.

The other, shorter paper on a historical irruption of the ancient god-figures into Poland caught my eye, but I could make myself read no more.

5.

I HAD RESEARCHED NOW FOR FOUR HOURS WITHOUT letup. The early afternoon showed overcast and windy in the bay window of my study. I pushed the Pasterby materials away from me and rose and paced the worn Persian rug. Some thought was moving about just beyond my consciousness, like a beetle behind wainscoting.

I decided to clear my head with a chilly, brisk walk.

My habitual excursion took me two blocks south on Oakley Street to a small, rock-walled park almost in the center of Queen City. I dressed for the look of the weather, plucked my rosewood walking cane from the umbrella stand, and locked the door behind me.

It was a little before four o'clock and the hour was as cold as its aspect had promised. Three spacious parks lie on the outskirts of town, but Cornwallis Park, small and densely wooded, with neat, winding paths, was the one to which I often resorted to unclutter my brain of tedious legal details. In spring it was colorful with flame, coral, and white azaleas, an Impressionist profusion along its four borders. In this bleak December light the tree trunks stood stark and unmoving, though the bare top branches whipped in the wind.

Once I entered from the gateway on Oakley and continued the downward path to the streamlet that cut through the declivity, I thought the light was different here than along the deserted street. The dimness was suffused with a whitish orange glow for which I could discern no source of emanation. This was not a steady light; there were motions within it, slow undulations like the rise and fall of yearning energies.

As I continued I heard a rustling in the duff and fallen leaves. It was innocuous at first, and it took it to be four or five squirrels scrambling about. But the sound grew louder and surrounded me and I began to grow apprehensive. The noise was not random; it was an organized sound.

I felt a presence of some sort, not as if I were being watched—as if I were being known and had been known from a former time.

My feelings of confusion and dread heightened as I reached the bottom of the hill and paused at the point where a small, picturesque stone bridge overarched the streamlet. Beyond this point, about fifteen yards away, the underbrush left off and opened onto a lawn where children often played. But now from the undergrowth emerged a force of rats. They were gathered into a delta-like formation which grew in size till it resembled a flood; they appeared to be marshaled into this formation by some power of will not their own. The mass of them kept enlarging; there must have been thousands. They were headed away from me, away from the park. If they kept moving in the direction they were pointed, they would enter the downtown area. They poured around an overgrown bend in the stream and disappeared from my line of vision.

I sat down on the ledge of the little bridge and drew deep breaths. Above me stood an old, very tall, black oak. It was a communally beloved object, a great tree that in decades past had sported a wide canopy. In latter years its age began to show and it became hollow, sheltering a large bee colony. This past year the colony had collapsed and the tree had begun to lean. Only public sentiment kept the park crews from taking it down.

Now from the large open crease that ran down the upper third of its length a black-winged creature emerged, twitching its torso as if it were shrugging off an outer garment. But the way its wings were folded about it made it look as if it were an overcoat, oversized and enveloping.

I had seen her only three times before, but I now recognized Leetha with her long black hair and her large almond eyes that shone bright black in the cold dimness. Her features were distorted, the eye-shapes pulled back until they were nearly slit-like, the cheekbones protrusive, the chin tapered sharply. She was almost directly above me, but a thick limb obscured her legs and feet. She leaned forward from the trunk and teetered precariously for a moment. Then she opened her wide wings with their taloned ribs and, with extreme effort, raised them to shoulder height and launched herself into the pulsing air.

Large as she was, she was quickly lost to sight among the naked trees with their intricate network of limbs against the gray and black clouds overhead.

The orange-white light that tinged the atmosphere grew brighter, the white gathering to a crackling intensity. Then it flashed out like an immense

arc-spark and subsided immediately to its former degree of intensity.

My face and hands tingled from the eruption, and I lost the ability to see for a good while. When my eyes readjusted I could find no trace of the Leetha-creature with the black overcoat that became wings, with the dark gaze that took my measure unthinkingly.

My knees trembled so that when I tried to stand I collapsed back onto the stone ledge.

The barrier had been violated. Lilithian Babylon was entering my world.

I sat for a space in blank confusion, fearful of the threat of things I could not picture. Olsen's warnings had made their case. I had better get home quickly, I thought, and rose unsteadily and walking, punching the ground determinedly with my cane.

The park that had been deserted before my arrival now seemed even emptier. No birds sang. The fitful breezes rustled no foliage. All was as still as if time had suspended.

I strode along as quickly as I could. If what I feared had already taken place, there would be no safe haven anywhere in the region, but I wanted to feel to comfort of my house around me. I wanted to boil a pot of Earl Grey tea and sit with it in silence.

But there on my front stoop stood Dr. Olsen. His expression was troubled, his words impatient. "We must go at once to the Pasterby house. Here is my car."

It sat at the curb with the motor running.

"The barriers are down," I said. "The continua are joining."

He nodded curtly and gestured and we hurried to squirm into the car. Olsen put it in gear and pressed the accelerator. His face was pale, his lips tight.

"What can we do?" I said. "The pieces of the Opener must have joined, though I don't see how it could have happened."

"Pasterby brought the artifact home with him, did he not? He could not find it when he woke from his dream, but it was close by. Leetha saw it and, without understanding her own actions, brought it into contact with the half she already had in her possession."

"How did she come to have it?"

"It would have been among the trinkets the enraged Aunt Cassie flung into the yard. Leetha would have found it and kept it as a curiosity. Or her

father, Rast, might have recognized it and laid it by. He is the unknown figure in the narrative. He harbored ill will toward Robbie Pasterby because of some transaction or other—”

“But we are helpless, are we not? The pieces are joined. The rest is physics, as you described in your essay.”

“There are some possibilities,” he said. “Did you read the other paper on Goray?”

“I did not. My eyes gave out. It seemed to be some sort of historical theory.”

He cut a quick glance at me, then concentrated on driving. The sky was closing in and the streets of the town were nearly empty. On the sidewalk and in the gutters poured a red-eyed stream of rats. Olsen paid them no heed.

“It was no theory. It digests the fullest account that we have of a former breakdown of the barriers. This took place in a shtetl outside Lublin in Poland in 1665. There the forces of Babylon, in the guise of Lilith, gained control and the laws of nature broke down. In the following years over one hundred thousand died, most of them devout Jews whose faith the gods feared and despised. Lilith chose a woman named Rechele as her instrument, a woman very like our Leetha ...” He fell silent and shook his head. “This is no time for a history lesson.” He launched us faster along the empty road. The town lay behind us now.

The horizon was continually aglow, orange-colored with a brilliant white central streak. Yet there was no sound of thunder. Like the crazed advance of the rats, this phenomenon too took place in unnerving silence.

“The house is not far from here,” I said.

Olsen strained his torso forward over the steering wheel, as if to impart a greater speed to his nondescript Ford. “Plagues of dysentery and fever,” he said. “A great drought and then drenching downpours month after month. Floods that carried off the children of Goray and the sheep and goats. Continual strokes of lightning against every edifice. Rats. Rats and adders. Insanity.”

“The people went mad?”

“They behaved as if they were. That was probably for the best.”

“How—?”

He peered through the windshield at the darkness that wrapped us round like a pall. “Suppose a transcontinental jetliner took off from O’Hare in Chicago and landed on a plain in ancient Mesopotamia. Suppose you were a citizen of ancient Erech and you witnessed the arrival. You would see it as a monster more frightening than any you had been told of in the mythologies, frightening beyond comprehension. A huge, silver, flying creature, as long as the main thoroughfare of your village. It roars like the wildest of sandstorms and is clouded with unbreathable dust. Its flat, stiff wings tremble and spurt flame. Flame leaps out from beneath its tail feathers. Along its belly are holes through which you can see the forms and faces of the people it has swallowed. It shudders and roars like a dozen tempests bound with lightning together.”

“It would be frightening, but I could still reason.”

“You could reason only in your customary terms—which would no longer apply. The existence of the jet plane in your world changes that world. You could not perceive it as it is. You would see it in terms of nightmare and demonic presence. That is how you would try to reason about it.”

“I would have had no forewarning. The Babylonian would have no background knowledge. But you and I are forewarned. We know the history of Lilith and how the goddess came to be connected with our locality. We can still act rationally, you and I.”

He smiled a tight, painful smile. “The airplane would exist very briefly in that place. The physics would be too alien.”

“Physics?”

“The atmospheric chemistry is different. The continuum itself has a different gravitic center from ours; it is held together from a different locus. The magnetic polarities are reversed. Subatomic reactions would be almost instantaneous.”

We had reached the border of the estate, and the turnoff led us alongside a white rail fence toward the grounds of the big house. The landscape was bathed in the orange-white glow that pulsed like the heart of some invisible beast.

Then the car stopped. The motor shut down and the headlights failed. We sat inside a furnace of heatless light.

Olsen spoke with great difficulty. "The Pasterbys are no more. You see Lilith where their great house stood. Do not look upon her face."

Her face was covered. We were still almost a quarter of a mile away, but she was visible in the electric glow, as large as a mountain crag. Her wings were folded about her, the pennons burning iridescent. Black, yellow, scarlet. Black fire and white fire. Then she began to unfurl her wings, slowly at first, and then in an instant they covered all that part of the sky and the scorched land below.

I looked away so that I would not see her face.

Then I closed my eyes to shut out the gigantic incandescence of her appearance and disappearance. I have seen many photographs of the detonation at Los Alamos. But those explosions were of matter in its particle states. The explosion here was one of time-states. There are no time-particles. This detonation would be without radioactive residue. Its causes must disappear utterly.

Still there was no sound, only the unbearable silence.

"Physics," I whispered.

"Did you see her face?" Olsen said.

"I saw her feet with the mansion in her talons, all crushed to pieces."

"It is good you did not see. I looked away. I did not see her claws."

The glow that had lit the world was extinguished. The darkness was palpable, but it no longer breathed.

The motor started now when Olsen tried it and our headlights came on and he brought us along the gravel road at a very slow pace. His face was wet with sweat. I found that I was weeping, making no sound.

"We will discover some remains here," he said. "The reciprocity must be maintained, the balance between the energies of the continua."

He stopped and we got out and walked unsteadily across the lawn. Figures lay upon the ashen grass, disposed haphazardly.

Life-size figures of black stone lay here, too many to count. Each was maimed in some fashion, mutilated by the joining of two different states of nature. Feet were sheared in half, arms broken at shoulders, elbows, and wrists. Torsos were shattered. The facial features were twisted in agony, but most of the faces were obliterated. The figures were naked or dressed in hooded robes and I thought these must be the presences that the grandfather had sensed in the mountain-peak cavern in his dream, at the moment he

reached for the object in the stone vessel and never knew if he had taken hold of it.

“They have gained their satisfactions, Rast and Leetha and Lilith. When the grandfather broke his agreement, whatever it was, he broke the laws of physics. Lilith has gathered the Choneys to her world in Babylon. These stones on the ground are in exchange, all the Pasterbys that ever lived in the direct lineage. There must be fifteen generations here, at least.”

“It makes no sense,” I said. I touched one stone with the toe of my shoe. It was real.

“Not to us.”

Olsen looked westward toward Queen City, turning his head away from the end of the world. “We must prevent ourselves from trying to understand.”

“To forget?”

He gazed at me with a piteous expression. “We will not forget, but we will come to believe that we have forgotten.”

“That is madness.”

“For us, the only possible sanity,” he said.

Half Lost in Shadow

W. H. PUGMIRE

Wilum Hopfrog Pugmire has been an obsessed Lovecraftian since reading E'ch-Pi-El's tales and letters in the early 1970s. His many books include Bohemians of Sesqua Valley (Arcane Wisdom, 2013), Uncommon Places (Hippocampus Press, 2012), Some Unknown Gulf of Night (Arcane Wisdom, 2011), The Tangled Muse (Centipede Press, 2011), and Monstrous Aftermath (Hippocampus Press, 2015). He dreams in Seattle.

*“I am half sick of shadows,” said
The lady of Shalott.*

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

IT WAS MY FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY, AND I RESOLVED TO get drunk. So I left the cozy porch that was my refuge and strolled that afternoon to the liquor store, where I spent a fortune on a bottle of rum that had been distilled in 1952, in Martinique. Clutching the paper bag in which I carried my bottle of golden nectar, I strolled along the shoreline where most of the ancient wharves had been broken apart or fallen in rot into the water. On one dilapidated pier, however, a phantom danced. Her theatrical gown of black swayed about her and conjoined with the dark veils that hung about her figure. I was too far from her to make out her face, most of which was covered by her length of raven hair; but I thought that perhaps she wore a pall over her countenance. We had many zanies in Kingsport, among our poets and painters mostly; but their crazy antics rarely *disturbed* me in any real way, as this creature did. I watched for a few minutes, until she stopped moving as she faced my direction; and the way that she was bent over, heaving and juddering, so reminded me of a bird of prey preparing for a kill that, nonplussed, I continued on my way to Water Street and the ancient cottage whose porch I called my home.

It was going on late afternoon by the time I reached the high iron gate that opened onto my place of residence, and I was happy to walk past the gnarled trees in the front yard, among which strange large stones had been oddly grouped and painted so that they resembled the queer alien idols of some obscure Asian or African temple. Those stones had been effective in keeping people away from the former occupant of the cottage, a tall lean centenarian known to most as the Terrible Old Man, a non-social fellow who paid for groceries and household items with antique coins of minted silver and gold.

It was my habit to camp out on the front porch of the centuried cottage, an area that held warmth no matter the time of year; but I didn't want to spend my birthday alone, and so I pushed open the narrow oak door of the dwelling and entered into a dusky room that was crowded with the bizarre items that its former-sea-captain occupant had collected during his decades of travel and plunder. Near one small-paned window I had set a table, which I had found in an otherwise empty room and on which a collection of peculiar bottles had been placed, in each of which a small piece of lead or

stone was suspended pendulum-wise from a string attached to the cork stopper. When the Terrible Old Man lived, he would sit at the table in the small room, drink his booze, and talk to these bottles, and after the old captain's disappearance I continued this practice. But I hadn't liked the lonesomeness of the little room, and so I had moved the table and its bottles to the more spacious main room, next to a window that overlooked the yard and its suggestively painted stones.

I took the bottle of Rhum Clément Tres Vieux X. O. from its paper bag and set it on the table, pulled up a high stool and sat. "I drink to you, my hearties!" I saluted the dusty containers before me, touched the bottle's mouth to my lips, and sipped. The liquor was dry, woody, with a hint of spice and fruit in its body. "Shall I drink to another fifty years? Am I doomed to exist here as did the captain, a lonely loon aged one hundred years, lingering on because extinction is of little import? Ah, but where are my manners?" Leaning toward the dusty old bottles, I poured a little of the precious liquid onto the stopper of each one, smiling as minute streams of rum trickled down the streaked sides of murky glass. "Imbibe, mates."

I drank until the light of day was extinguished outside the small-paned window; and then I lit three stout candles near the table and drank some more. As flickering shadows danced about the cluttered room, I made up pirate ditties and serenaded the pendulums inside the bottles, those pendulums on which small indistinct faces had been chiseled. In a voice that grew slurred, I spoke to those pendulums of my easy life, of the poetry I had written, of the poems I may yet compose; and as they harkened to my words, those pendulums seemed to vibrate in sympathy at the mutterings of a drunken fool. I laughed as eyesight blurred and the dusty old bottles took on new shapes, and I gibbered at the shadow that pressed against the window from outside, the shadow that seemed to regard me and to which I raised my nearly empty bottle of nectar. "Come in, come in. Rest among our other shadows and dream the misty dreams of Kingsport. Come, out of the cold wind and chilly moonlight. Have a sip as I celebrate this disease called 'Life.' Come on, no need to flitter beneath the gnarled trees, among the scheming stones. Enter!"

I laughed as I was answered by the wind that danced among the branches of the nearby trees, those branches that tapped against the antediluvian dwelling. A momentary movement of tempest rushed about me as the

cottage door was opened, and I nodded at the shadow that spilled into the room. As my blurred eyesight took in the phantom, I thought I recognized it; and as I scrutinized the being it began to spin, so that its black dress and dark veils lifted to the room's low ceiling. I watched its danse, and my sodden head began to spin with it, until the wormy walls appeared to bend. The creature stopped to contemplate me, but how it could do so I could not comprehend, for it wore no face. Lifting my bottle to it, I proposed a toast, but then I noticed that my rum had been entirely consumed. However, I had a half-bottle of white wine among my stash on the porch where I slept, and so I struggled to my feet to fetch it; but before I could take more than a half-step, I fell and felt my face crash against the floorboard.

“A pale thing floating in a blur of fleecy jet, with eyes that watched as it twisted to and fro. It sways like the small humming things inside the Terrible Old Man's bottles, those petite pendulums on which faces of a sort had been carved. Ancient eyes in a youthful face—penetrating gaze. Strings of lifeless hair, dull brown in hue, and the thin hungry mouth. Oh, the sad sad smile.”

Soft laughter sighed from her as the phantom listened to my talk, my words that I had meant to be thought alone as I emerged from the shadow of my drunken blackout. The figure had removed the veil with which her thin and pretty face had been covered. Bending to me, she smoothed one hand against my forehead, where I felt a tender pain. I detected a scent of lilacs in her tangled hair, probably an ointment. Suddenly, she floating upward and perched onto the edge of the chair at the table, and I watched as she examined the dusty bottles. “I had a pirate ancestor who was engaged by an old sea-captain.” Turning her head, she looked on me with an expression I could not read. “Philippa Angelica Ellis, of Toronto.” She returned her attention to the bottles and began to hum an eccentric tune, and I sensed the hanging pendulums begin to vibrate in response. Crawling to the table, I elevated my hand to her mouth and stopped her noise. I could feel the delicate bones beneath her mask of flesh.

“When was your last meal?” She shrugged, but I caught a tinge of woe that darkened her eyes. Holding on to the table, I lifted myself to a standing position and stalked to a shelf that held a number of antique metal boxes. Opening one, I took some gold doubloons from it, returned to her, and pressed the coins to her palm.

She wiggled her fingers so that the coins danced in her hand. "Pirate's booty? How quaint."

"What brings you to New England?"

She hesitated before answering, and then sighed heavily. "I was performing in an acting troupe, and we played in nearby Arkham."

"You speak in past tense. Are you no longer with the company?"

"I have grown sick of shadows," she recited, and then cocked her head in a curious way. "That's from Oscar Wilde. I saw that you have the novel on that small shelf of books outside."

I nodded. "What brings you to Kingsport, my lady?"

"The car I hitched a ride with is from here, so I pretended this was my destination. Once I saw the town I felt a kind of glow, a warmth within me. I think I've visited this place once, in a dream of mist and moonlight." She rose out of the chair and raised one hand to my breast, as if to take hold of my heart, and I saw that she was little more than a child. Some tragic element in her being filled me with sudden sorrow, and I wanted to protest when, suddenly and silently, she glided from the cottage, into outer darkness.

Becoming aware of a subtle pulse of pain on my forehead, I sat in the chair, placed my elbows on the table, and buried my head in my hands. This main room inside the cottage had always worn an uncanny air, but there was a new element of strangeness now, and the lingering fragrance of lilacs. I reached out to smooth a finger against the cool glass of the tallest bottle, the one that the Terrible Old Man had called "Long Tom." I smiled at the memory of my early years in Kingsport, when I had dropped out of the world and first began to camp on the comfortable porch of the obsolete cottage. The sea-captain seemed to welcome my presence, and soon he began to invite me inside his cluttered home and spin yarns about his journeys around the globe. My memory of him was crystal clear: the blue eyes that sparkled in a deeply lined face, the long white hair and beard, his olden way of talk and queer vocabulary. We would sit together at the table in the otherwise vacant room, and he would include his bottles in our conversation, calling them by name—"Jack" and "Peters" and "Spanish Joe." I regarded those antique bottles and realized that the smallest, the one called "Mate Ellis," was missing. A kind of panic swept over me. After the old man's disappearance, I had felt a sense of duty, of watching over his

habitation and keeping invaders at bay. Groaning, I stood and walked out onto the porch, grabbed my jacket, and stepped briskly out of the yard. A bright moon illuminated my way to the wharves, and on one dilapidated pier a phantom danced.

The horn of some invisible boat moaned in the distance. It was low tide, yet I could see that the water was quickly creeping toward shore. The water's rhythm oddly matched the movement of my blood, and I could discern its relentless motion in my ears. The young creature's ditty, too, seeped to my ears, the faint song of lunacy that blended with the baleful hooting of the distant horn. Reaching the wharf, I stepped onto its antique timber and felt as the entire thing swayed, coaxed by the movement of her dancing. Her scent of lilacs wafted to me. "Miss Ellis," I whispered.

She stopped spinning and studied me from behind the dark veil that concealed her countenance once more. Her hands were wrapped around the small bottle, which she pressed against her bosom. "He called to me in dream, but I could never locate him. I was too young, too sane. Not yet claimed by our heritage of wanton madness. Yet the dreams always tugged, especially beneath the shifting stars of Arkham, and I finally found my way." Holding the bottle up to lunar light, she studied its moving pendulum. "I've lost all my family, but I'm happy to have found him. He's danced with me in dream, and kissed my eyes. What kind of wizardry was woven, I wonder, that spliced his soul to that small pendulum inside this bottle?" Looking upward to the moon, she sniffed. "Can you smell it, the rising mist over the water that washes toward us? Do you taste the water's antique memories, of sunken ships and drowned souls? How wonderful to feel such kinship with others who have lost their way." Her eyes regarded mine. "But maybe you cannot. Your mind isn't wayward enough, I think. You haven't dreamed deeply enough. Something inside you resists the marvelous things. And yet you insist on lingering here, in this realm of dark enchantment and spectral trance."

"I sense it keenly enough. I choose not to partake. My wizardry is language, the spinning of poetry."

"Poetry benefits from madness, good sir. Let's drink of lunacy together, now."

I could hear the waves of the encroaching sea. The sound of moving fabric filtered to me, as she began to dance once more, as one arm swung

outward and hurled the bottle onto the rocks. She twirled and tittered, ignoring the murky shadow that formed over the place whereupon the bottle had smashed. I watched the thick wisps of blackness that coiled toward us, that enshrouded the entire pier. Her scent of lilacs was replaced with a stench of wretched death. I heard the disembodied moan that was not the horn of any vessel. The rotting wharf shuddered beneath our feet as ghostly tones vibrated in the helix of shadow, a masculine voice that uttered an old sea ditty that the Terrible Old Man and I used to croon to the bottles in times of happy drunkenness. I saw the pale and pretty face that moved toward me from the darkness, and so I called her name; but then I realized that, although it shared the young woman's features, this was the visage of a young man. Sickly, he sang to me, and drifted to my face so as to kiss my eyes. I felt the wharf shudder more forcefully and heard it begin to break apart. Backing away, I raised my hands to the shadow in which I was sheathed and tried to find my way to land as waves began to sound more forcefully upon the rocks below us. The wood on which I staggered suddenly collapsed and I fell a second time that night, onto a bed of rocks, the sharp edge of one cutting into my forehead. I blinked through the tiny stream of blood that trickled into my eyes as the tide lapped at the legs that helped me creep to land.

Shadow lifted, melting into moonlight. Gasping, groaning, I twisted my head to look at where the ancient wharf had stood, and saw that it had entirely collapsed and dropped onto the rocks. I saw its remnants, and the various sharp-edged boulders, and the waves that washed over the debris of stones and timber. That was all. Then my attention was caught by some shining things that shimmered at one spot beneath the waves, and I saw that they were a handful of gold doubloons that caught the sheen of moonlight. A rising wind eddied to me from the water, on which I could detect a faint fragrance of lilacs.

The Rasping Absence

RICHARD GAVIN

Richard Gavin is regarded as a master of numinous horror fiction in the tradition of Machen, Blackwood, and Lovecraft. “The Rasping Absence” marks his third appearance in the Black Wings series. Richard has written four collections, including The Darkly Splendid Realm (Dark Regions Press, 2009) and At Fear’s Altar (Hippocampus Press, 2012), along with essays on the macabre and the esoteric. He lives in Ontario, Canada.

TRENT FENNER COULDN'T GAUGE HIS SUPERVISOR'S reaction to the re-edited news segment. Upon the wall-mounted television, animated galaxies spun like tops within simulated space.

"Astonishing as it sounds" (Trent never liked the way his voice sounded on television, even after two years of reporting), "some physicists suspect that the longstanding model of reality, which suggests that our universe is made up of atoms, is wrong. This mysterious substance we call Dark Matter, along with a repulsive force dubbed Dark Energy, make up ninety-six percent of our universe. It seems that the universe is much darker than we suspected.

"Dark Matter cannot be seen. It neither reflects nor deflects light, and it seems to be part of a reality completely distinct from our own. And yet, billions of Dark Matter particles surround us. As Dr. Douglas Newman of Newfoundland's EXCEL physics laboratory put it, 'Dark Matter represents the distinct possibility that our universe is a vast haunted house, where billions of these mysterious particles of pass through the walls, and even our bodies, every day without our knowing or feeling it.'"

Lester shifted in his seat as the image on the screen changed: Trent and Dr. Newman were entering the orange-painted cage of a mine elevator. The conveyor cables emitted a low hum as they lowered the cage into the bowels of the mine. Trent's face filled the screen. The sight of him in a hardhat made Lester chuckle.

"Some of you might be wondering why physicists like Dr. Newman would go looking for Dark Matter some five hundred metres underground in this abandoned iron-ore mine here on Bell Island, Newfoundland, instead of looking up at the heavens. In order to obtain a particle of Dark Matter that is untainted by cosmic rays and other contaminants, scientists have to go deep underground. It's eerily appropriate that we're going looking for the Dark within the dark ..."

"This is where Newman describes trying to catch Dark Matter particles, yes?" Lester asked, his finger held on the remote control's Advance button.

"Using frozen germanium plates, right," replied Trent.

Lester nodded. He paused the video on a simulacrum of Dark Matter, which the show's animators designed as swarms of bluish-purple specks

that swaddled our galaxy.

“I like it,” Lester confessed. Perspiration caused his bare, pinkish scalp to glisten like a glazed ham.

“The script I gave you for my new epilogue, was it okay? I tried to sound more reassuring in this version.”

Lester dismissed Trent’s concerns with a sweep of his hand. “The closing speech works. I wouldn’t worry about viewers getting upset. This Dark Matter stuff might rattle their nerves until the next commercial break, but in the end Canadians are more concerned about brass tacks; government spending, gas prices, the usual.”

“You’re probably right,” Trent said. He wrestled with whether or not to vent some of the pressure that had been mounting within him. “I have to admit, this story kind of got to me.” He felt himself blushing.

Lester offered a wry smile. “Kid, what have I always said about you? You’ve got a reporter’s nose but not his skin. Yours is too thin. This field will chew you up if you take every story inside you. Reporters have to be objective for more than just ethical reasons. If you make every story personal, you’ll crack.”

Trent bit his lip.

Perhaps sensing his tensions, Lester slapped his hand on his desk as a purging gesture; bleakness be gone. “You know what I think you need right about now? A vacation.”

“Well, as luck would have it ...”

“The break will be good for you and the family. But isn’t it going to be kind of a whirlwind for you, just getting back from Newfoundland yesterday and heading up north tomorrow?”

“We’re actually leaving tonight. Melissa’s packing as we speak.”

“I bet the little one’s excited.”

The very mention of Jasmine summoned within Trent a warm, calming wave.

“You have no idea. Melissa told me Jasmine’s been talking nonstop about the holiday since I left for the east coast.”

“You’ll all love Pine Bluffs,” Lester assured him.

“I’m sure we will, Les. Thanks again for the use of your cottage.”

“See you in two weeks?”

Trent shook Lester’s offered hand. “In two weeks.”

* * *

Evening air gusting through the open car windows rejuvenated Trent as he followed the bias in the two-lane roadway. Toronto long behind him now, he strained to untangle the stress knots in his psyche.

“Hello? Earth to Trent?”

He glanced over. Melissa dangled a bottle of water between her fingers. Trent uttered an apology. Melissa uncapped the bottle and handed it to him.

“You’ve been a million miles away all evening. Did something happen at the meeting today?”

“No, Lester liked the recut footage. Well, as much as Lester likes anything.”

“So what is it then? Your episode’s been approved and now you’re on a country holiday with your charming wife and beautiful daughter.”

He glanced at her. Melissa winked.

“Oh, I know,” Trent began, “believe me, I know. This is just what I need. Stupid as it sounds, this story got under my skin.”

“That’s not stupid at all,” Melissa returned. “It’s a freaky subject. But it’s just a theory, isn’t it?”

“Well, they do have evidence that Dark Matter is all over the universe, but it’s so alien they can’t figure out its purpose. It just blows me away that there is scientific evidence, *proof*, that everything we know about reality makes up only four percent of the universe. *Four percent!* For all our talk of colonizing Mars or beating cancer, we’re like one tiny candle guttering inside a massive cave. And the cave wasn’t designed by us. Or even for us ...”

“You know what I think? Even if everything we know is only a little candle that’s going to be snuffed out a billion years from now, so be it. We’re here now, and that’s good enough for me.”

Trent brought her hand to his lips. “Me too,” he said through a kiss. How he wished that it was the truth.

The last mottles of daylight appeared as coins, freshly burnished and carelessly tossed from above, as the hatchback approached the tiny hamlet, like some mechanized scarab racing to inter the ailing sun.

* * *

They were gobsmacked to discover that their holiday accommodations were nearer to a beachfront bungalow than a humble cottage. The cold supper they ate on the back deck seemed to nourish not only Trent's body but also his spirit. At bedtime the three of them were lulled by the susurrus of the distant surf. All was right.

Still the shadows managed to puncture this airtight calm.

Dream spirited Trent back into the bowels of Bell Island. But now the laboratory was submerged in brackish water.

Trent tried to swim but couldn't. He felt shoed in weighted boots, which made all movement taxing. The liquid was thicker than mere H₂O and seemed unwilling to part for him. Instead, it resisted with a pressure that threatened to fracture his bones. The fluid crowded his nostrils, sprang between his clenched teeth to seal his throat like caulking. He knew his only hope was to surface.

He pushed off with a titanic effort. Bits of sediment rushed past him as he swam, yet he saw only black.

As he wriggled upward, the texture of the liquid began to thicken. And this brought an epiphany: Trent was not swimming at all, nor was he about to break the surface of a quarry-like pool. He was being dragged up through the earth, punching through soil, sediment, and concrete, until at last the bed of all ages sought fit to birth him into a realm of unbearable light and warmth.

Twitching, helpless, Trent could do little more than stare up at the men and women encircling him. Their hands gripped the lemon-yellow guard rails, their lab coats glowed like chalk lanterns. Strangers to a one, their expressions varied from utter disbelief to primal horror.

Trent tried to speak, but the sound that emerged was a coarse rasping, like a hacksaw dragging into wire. It echoed through the emptiness above him.

He shot up in bed with a strangled cry. His terror had not disrupted the shallow tide of Melissa's breathing.

The ashen glow through the windows and the ache behind his eyelids established that it was too early to be awake. Not wishing to risk being dropped back into that nightmare lab, Trent slipped out from beneath the sheet and prepared for a run.

Only the geriatric residents of Pine Bluffs seemed to be up and about at this hour. Their congenial waves or bids of good morning as Trent jogged past their storybook cottages brought a pleasant feeling.

It was chillier along the shore, but Trent used this as motivation to run harder. The lake was the colour of caramel. Gulls alternated between circling the overcast sky and swooping down to peck at the vivid carrion of yesterday's French fry cups and hamburger wrappers from The Snack Hut.

He turned his attention to the impressive bluffs after which the village had been named. They formed an ambit at the shore, arcing into the water like a great bookend of sun-baked clay. Birches and pines spiked the incline's face, lent teeth to its summit. It was evocative of a moon crater's rim—a resemblance that made Trent uneasy.

Movement in his periphery evidenced that Trent was not alone. He turned his head enough to see the beach's only other sunrise visitor: a whip-thin man whose overtanned skin was the cast of shoe leather. He was dressed only in a gaudy pair of swimming trunks (Trent didn't enjoy the way the Tiki mask pattern seemed to study his approach) and a dull metal medallion, which looked to be the Star of David, hanging from his spindly neck.

The man was too absorbed in his task to give Trent even a nod. He appeared to be gathering sand from the hem where the bluffs melded with the shore. The man's own slender hands were his only tools. He clawed up handful after handful of the wet granules, stockpiling them into a variety of plastic shopping bags.

"Floodwall?" Trent asked with a smile. When the man did not react, Trent repeated himself, assuming that his own lack of breath had made the question inaudible.

A great mantis in both posture and movement, the old man collected his bagged sand. Several of the bags had already begun to split under their own cargo; clumps and granules hemorrhaging back onto the ground as the man tied them to an almost comical-looking bicycle half-digested by rust. Trent was now near enough to observe that the medallion, which seemed to weigh the man like a ship anchor, was not a Star of David, but a symbol far more cryptic. The bauble was obviously handmade, and crudely at that. Trident spokes and leaf-like curlicues jutted out every which way. And at their point of convergence, was that a rudimentary face?

The stranger straddled his bicycle and began to pedal. He nearly toppled, the sight of which caused Trent to gasp and reach feebly. Velocity righted the cycle, and soon the pack mule of a man reached the dirt road and was gone.

A sneaker wave crashed down, its reach broad enough to wash Trent's feet. He looked over as the foamy wake ebbed, revealing the pit dug by the old man. The hole was now filled with frothy swirling water, which gave it the appearance of an inhumed cauldron.

... toil and trouble ...

He reversed his course and began back to the cottage, walking at first, then, inexplicably, breaking into a wild run.

Seeing Melissa carrying a breakfast tray out onto the back deck brought not relief, but greater panic, for Trent now saw what he stood to lose if he didn't reach safety in time.

His imaginary pursuit ended with his rambling up the wooden steps and all but collapsing into one of the Adirondack chairs.

"Hi, Daddy!"

Trent hadn't even noticed Jasmine seated in one of the great chairs until he heard her birdsong voice. Her tiny hand was patting the sanded plank of the chair arm. She leaned forward, her heart-shaped plastic sunglasses darkening her eyes, a smile brightening her already cherubic face.

"Good morning, sweet-pea," Trent huffed. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yep!"

"Me too."

Melissa gave him a peck and a mug of coffee-with-cream. "How was your run?"

Trent nodded. "This is a nice place."

"Beautiful," Melissa corrected.

"When can we go swimming?" Jasmine asked.

"We'll see," Trent replied. His gaze snagged on a brooding cloud in the east. "We may be in for a storm."

* * *

The storm didn't come that day. By noon the sun had burnt through the steely padding of clouds.

Trent returned to the beach, this time with his family, and this time it was now a hive of activity: voices, splashing, a cacophony of radio music; the air fragrant with birch wood and grilling meat.

Trent, Melissa, and Jasmine staked their claim by laying out beach towels on a little patch of sand.

“C’mon, you guys!” Jasmine cried, her chubby feet stomping divots into the sand. Trent took her hand and she tugged him toward the water. The bluffs darkened the edge of his field of vision, but Trent refused to acknowledge them.

The sight of Jasmine so enraptured by the rustic pleasures of sun and surf soothed him. After a while Melissa took over watching Jasmine to allow Trent some swimming time.

Trent submerged himself beneath the waves. The cool dimness, the isolation, the air held tight in his lungs: he felt he had somehow slipped back into his dream.

His surfacing was dramatic, or so he believed. For one awful instant he wondered whether he had indeed become the shrieking thing. But none of the other bathers seemed aware of his existence.

The undertow must have been stronger than Trent realized, for it had whisked him several metres nearer to the bluffs. He was facing them full-on now.

They were the antithesis of the beach, with its all its life and noise and ceaseless motion. The bluffs were austere and silent and staid. Even its trees appeared unwavering. Such stillness made it very easy for Trent to spot the tiny figure traipsing along the top of the bluffs.

Trent cupped his hands and splashed some water on his face in the thin hope this would cleanse the apparition. When it didn’t, he made his way back to shore.

Melissa and Jasmine were huddled under the meagre shade of a staked umbrella.

“Jasmine’s shoulders were getting a little pink,” Melissa explained.

“Why don’t we head back now? I’ll drive into town for more groceries.”

“Aw, I don’t wanna go!” Jasmine cried.

“We’ll come back tomorrow, sweet-pea. Besides, I need you to pick out the ice cream for dessert.”

It was all the incentive Jasmine required. They returned to the cottage just long enough for Trent to fetch his car keys, and then they piled into the hatchback and drove to the barn-like grocery outlet they'd spotted on their way in.

Cornucopia was its name; a co-op that looked to be run by survivors of the Age of Aquarius. The cashier was congenial, chatting up Trent while she tallied their bill. Melissa and Jasmine took the bags to the car while Trent finished the transaction.

"Oh," the cashier blurted, her eyes locked on something beyond their large show window, "here comes old Isaac. Have you seen him pedalling around the village yet?"

Trent heard the copper pipe chimes above the entrance begin to clang. He shook his head but could not bring himself to turn around.

The cashier spoke *sotto voce*: "Comes in here every afternoon without fail. And he always buys the same stuff. Canned goods mostly; soup, lentils, that sort of thing. I kid him about stockpiling for Doomsday, but I don't think Isaac gets the joke."

Trent heard the methodical scuffling of feet passing across the oiled wood floor. He grabbed his receipt and hastened for the door.

* * *

Trent spent more energy trying to keep his anxieties in check than he did cooking dinner. The food was delicious, but Melissa wasn't swallowing his forced joviality. Over dessert Jasmine began to show signs of too much sun and surf, so Melissa tucked her in early. When she returned to the deck she was armed with two glasses of white wine.

"So?" she asked.

Trent shrugged.

"You've not been yourself since you got back from that damned assignment. What's troubling you? Still this Dark Matter business?"

He sighed with authentic resignation. "I honestly don't know. I just have this heavy feeling. I've had it since I went down into that damned lab. I don't seem able to shake it."

"But you've covered stories far more disturbing than this, hon. Teen shootings, sweatshops, terrorist cells ..."

“I know, but I was able to wrap my head around those. I’d almost always uncover at least some of the causes behind the problem: poverty, loopholes in corporate law, whatever. Those cases would always offer at least some promise of a solution. But this ...”

His words trailed off. Melissa reached over and entangled her fingers with his. They sat and looked skyward; Melissa at the gleaming stars, Trent at the cold hollow between them.

Trent did not dream of Dark Matter that night. He did not dream at all. Dreams require sleep, and Trent knew none. Even his reliable trick of monitoring his breathing failed to lull him.

He shut his eyes and fought to shut off his brain.

But Night was lodged within his head. Constellations shimmered and blinked. They were smeared across the seemingly endless curve of his calvaria, like his very own planetarium. Between and beyond the nuggets of silver light stretched the vacuum of dead space; still and lightless and seemingly silent.

Seemingly, for there was a grating, grinding sound; underlying and ever-present, like the gears of some unfathomable machine turning, slowly turning ...

He was being drawn into the black gaps. Trent felt himself being pulled like a hooked fish into that abyss where even the flesh is forbidden. He struggled to pull back, but was lost in a magnetic field. Black grit whisked about him like granules in a sandstorm. It stung and froze his flesh. In a mere heartbeat Trent felt himself encased in scales of this light-eating armor.

There was purpose in their assault.

The specks of nothingness dug into Trent’s flesh until every pore became a socket embedded with a minute onyx eye. At once, these billion eyes sprung open. Trent Fenner became Sight itself; omniscience, the chariot that bore all the Dark Matter whose reality was not ours. In this new unlighted form, Trent tasted the colours of sounds, he seized the great cold knowledge that secrets itself within the rasping of the stars.

He understood, knew. No, more: Trent was Radiant.

He bolted up in bed, his sight instantly, mercifully dwindled down to a pair of mortal eyes that witnessed the bedroom in predawn gloom. Although he was not an emotional man, even in times of duress, Trent

began to cry. The fount of his sorrow was so deep it was incomprehensible to him. He pulled his aching body out of bed and crossed the cottage to the room where Jasmine slept soundly. He meditated on how dear she was to him.

How miraculous to be able to love, he thought.

Almost mindlessly, Trent donned his sweats and his runners.

He took to the dirt road, allowing blind instinct to guide him.

* * *

The footpath that fed off the shore and up onto the bluffs was thoroughly unremarkable; an almost unnoticeable strip of dirt that was only nominally less stony and weed-entangled than the untamed areas on either side of it.

Trent found the incline almost insurmountable. The sheerness of it caused his thighs to tighten and, seemingly, to ignite. His breathing was ludicrously laboured, as though he had reached some impossible altitude, when in fact he was scarcely above the tree-line. His fatigue baffled him. He had run much harder, over much more arduous terrain, and for much longer spans of time.

By now the sun was layering the lake with a netting of glints. Magpie-like, Trent fell under the spell of the distant shimmer until an obstacle on the path tripped him up. The object entangled around Trent's ankles, acting as a tripwire. He smashed down on the path, the breath instantly banished from his lungs. Pain speared through his ankle. His hands, bearing the bloody stigmata of tiny stones, reached down to remove whatever had ensnared him.

It was a plastic shopping bag. Dregs of wet sand lined its inner creases.

He was tearing it from his feet when he noticed the shadow staining the path.

Trent twisted his head to a painful degree, but all he could discern was a figure made coal-smudge-anonymous by the rising sun behind it.

Righting himself put on more weight than his ankle could bear. Trent stumbled to one side and came to rest upon the bluffs.

Isaac (Trent could clearly see him now) had turned away from his intruder and resumed working. The same swimming trunk Tiki masks watched Trent even when the old man couldn't be bothered.

Trent found himself oddly entranced by Isaac's labours. The crouching old man reached blindly for handful after handful of wet sand, culling it from the pile of bulging shopping bags beside him.

Isaac made a sudden sense to Trent: his eccentric attire, his aloofness, his peculiar reputation among the locals. He was an artist. Trent had interviewed enough of them last year for a story on homeless people who elaborately decorated alley walls and sidewalks with chalk drawings, many of which were astonishingly beautiful.

His journalistic instincts stoked, Trent pulled himself up and hobbled over to peek at Isaac's work-in-progress.

What he found was a hole bored deep into the bluff. Isaac was crouched at the lip of it, pouring handful after handful of clumpy sand into the aperture. Unless this was some Zen practice, Isaac was engaged in a fool's chore. Trent eyed the pit, then that morning's stockpile of beach sand. It was like a reverse version of the old fable about bailing out the ocean with a teaspoon.

Reposing next to Isaac was a chunk of dark matter.

Of course this black rock (likely volcanic glass) wasn't true Dark Matter, but its similarity to the computer-generated models used in his news story was strong enough to frighten Trent.

"I let it out." The creaking voice reminded Trent of an old gate swinging on rusty hinges. "Don't tell nobody. I let it out, but it wasn't nothing but an accident. Righting wrongs takes time, but I'm trying. See? I'm trying."

Another fistful of sand was ground between Isaac's palms like baker's flour. Into the hole it fell. Another reach, more sand. Trent could actually see Isaac's joints bucking and twitching within his scrawny frame like pistons of bone.

"Is there anything I can do? Why don't I get you some breakfast? You look like you could use it."

Isaac shook his longish head. "Too late for that now. All the eggs are broken anyway. You think you're smart enough to put them back together? I'd like to see you try!" There was a flare of indignation in his voice. He clasped the wiry medallion and brought it to his lips.

"Can you tell me what happened here, Isaac?" He had slipped into reporter-mode; a state of mind that brought Trent both comfort and

confidence, if for no other reason than that it afforded him a sense of detachment from his surroundings.

“I’m trying to fix this!”

“Fix what?”

Isaac fed a few more grains to the shadow.

Trent tried to swallow but found his throat a sandy tunnel. “What’s down there, Isaac?”

“Hardly anything now,” Isaac replied. “I told you, I let it out. Every night I’d hear it scraping and scratching inside the earth here. Every morning I’d pray that the noises would stop. Finally I came up here and did what I thought it wanted; I dug it out.

“I know it was a mistake. I know that now. So all I can do is try to right the wrong and try to fill the whole thing up so it’ll stop leaking out.”

“So what will stop leaking out?”

“It’s spoiling everything, everything it touches. And that big empty is getting into everything. I found this black rock here to plug the hole. I thought it would be fooled by the black colour, that it’d think this was still an open hole. It didn’t work.” Isaac held up his crude pendant. “I’m pretty safe though. I built myself a seal for protection. I’m airtight. But you? I don’t see a seal. You’re a fool coming up here without one. You’re a damned fool.”

An eel of nausea began to wriggle in Trent’s stomach, swimming up with such velocity it seemed to set the whole Earth spinning. He shut his eyes and saw dark amoebas splattering and splashing against his eyelids; tassels of midnight lustre that shrivelled as quickly as they thrived.

He was absorbing them now, eating this Dark Matter, his eyelids chewing the particles, his brain digesting them. Whether they were invading him from the open bluffs or whether he’d been contaminated in the old iron-ore mine was irrelevant. These seeds were beginning to hatch. They sprouted teeth and they were eating him, gutting him. Trent could feel them chewing up his muscles and bones, rendering him hollow. They passed through him like a rapid, ravenous cancer. And once he’d been voided of organ and bone, sinew and breath, Trent experienced the awful rasping sound as the Dark Matter grated and spun and revelled in the great absence within him.

He touched his chest. The lack of a protective talisman drained all the strength from his body.

Now intoxicated, Trent staggered helplessly back along the path.

Despite this drama and din, Isaac remained riveted by his task.

* * *

Trent hid among the pines until he felt he had his contagion under control.

He eventually returned to the cottage, telling Melissa that he'd gone for an especially long run this morning. She informed him that they were going to the beach after lunch. Trent layered himself in clothing to keep anything from radiating outward.

"You're going to roast!" she declared as Trent exited the patio door.

He stood dumb, dazed.

"Beach, mommy!" Jasmine cried.

They walked.

The beach was even busier than yesterday. Youth was everywhere. The only people Trent spotted who appeared older than him were the shore-bound fishermen stationed in their lawn chairs in the shallows.

They staked out their spot. At Jasmine's bouncing insistence, Melissa helped her wriggle into her water wings. Trent, overdressed in long trousers and a jacket, refused to lower himself down onto the granules. Nor would he heed the voiceless beckon of the bluffs. He looked out across the water and wondered how many more days of sunlight were left.

"Trent!"

He turned to see Melissa hunched before Jasmine. "For the fourth time, where is her lifejacket?"

Trent looked about foolishly. "I ... I must have left it at the cottage."

"I wanna swim, mommy!"

Melissa sighed. "Can you go back and get it?"

"Hmm?"

"Never mind," she huffed, pushing herself to her feet. "I'll go. Watch her, please. She's got her water wings, so she can go in, just not too far."

"Right."

"Trent?"

He looked at her.

“Watch her.”

He pushed his mouth into what he hoped was a reassuring grin. Judging by Melissa’s reaction, it was not.

Trent took Jasmine’s hand. Her palm was like a tiny silk pillow. They parted the water.

Jasmine slid her fingers free and began to stomp the shallows. Her steps caused water to bounce up like miniature fountains in the air. The tide flowed and ebbed. Overhead, gulls spun out precise spiral patterns.

A slow and silent tide also touched Trent from within. In no time it subsumed him. Trent saw the sky as a great murky ocean, pouring its Dark Matter down like sand through a sieve.

The scope of it, the indifference it exuded as it went through its bewildering machinations—these stifled Trent.

All was silent and dim; human activity was dimming, like candles guttering out one by one.

But then the candles began to brighten, raging against this meta-darkness. There was a flaring.

There was a crescendo of ugly sounds.

Trent snapped his head, and the Dark Universe was once more hidden behind a bright and busy mask. A stark image filled his eyes: a tiny figure in a shell of many colours, twitching just below the water’s surface.

“Mister!” yelled a male voice.

The fishermen had sprung from their lawn chairs as quickly as their aged bones would allow. Their poles were jerking about as though they had live wires in their spinners.

The men were waist-deep in the water now. One had scooped a bulky shape from the waves while the other ever-so-gently manoeuvred the fishing line.

The sight of Jasmine’s head hanging limp and heavy from the crook of the fisherman’s arm summoned in Trent a feeling that was far worse than being emptied. It mangled his heart. The alpha and omega of all life blazed from the crushed and dripping form that was drooped over the old man’s arms like a boned fish.

With trembling hands the second fisherman removed the last loop of the nylon line that had wound itself around Jasmine’s neck. They laid on her on the sand. Trent scuttled over to her, howling, his movements as alien-

looking as a crab's crawl. He positioned Jasmine's head and attempted the Kiss of Life.

Even in the cold, thick mire of his dread, Trent was somehow still aware of his contagion. The grinding voice in his head assured him that he would not be saving Jasmine, he would be poisoning her; breathing into her the tainted black particles of the mine shaft and of the gutted bluffs.

He sat up to draw in a fresh breath. Jasmine was still.

An eagle-like scream pierced through the murmurs that were swirling above Trent. All heads turned to see Melissa standing near The Snack Shack, the lifejacket hanging needlessly from her fist. She dropped it and ran forward.

Trent arched down to exhale again. He was abruptly shoved aside.

He remained slumped in the shallows, his clothing growing cold and heavy with the tide, and watched as Melissa did what his toxic self could not.

Jasmine convulsed. Melissa began to weep as she turned her child onto her side and saw water and saliva trickle out of the tiny mouth. Jasmine began to cough, and then to cry. She sounded like a mewling cat. Melissa kissed her sand-encrusted hair and sobbingly urged her to breathe, breathe ...

"Thank God," one of the fishermen said. "Thank God. I'm terribly sorry, ma'am. Your little one, she was starting to stray over to where our lines were cast. We tried to warn your husband. We didn't see her go under. We didn't know she'd gotten tangled up right away. I'm just ... Thank God, ma'am." He patted Jasmine's head delicately, as though she might shatter at his touch.

* * *

Melissa carried her back to the cottage, cooing to her, telling her how brave she was and how none of this was her fault. By the time they reached the back deck Jasmine was no longer crying.

Trent lagged behind, a pack mule burdened with all the cargo that was infinitely less precious than Jasmine.

He was not yet at their yard when Melissa flung open the sliding glass door to announce that she was driving Jasmine to the hospital to be

examined. She did not ask Trent to join them.

Their vehicle roared out of the driveway and down the country lane. Trent dropped the beach items on the lawn and shuffled to the cottage's living room, where he fell into one of the wicker bucket chairs.

It was dusk before Melissa returned. She entered the cottage with a bag from a fast-food chain. She uttered only two words to Trent: "She's fine."

She and Jasmine dined in the kitchen. Trent did not join them, but instead went to lie down.

The night deepened. Melissa had obviously opted to sleep next to Jasmine in her bedroom.

When Trent had at long last managed to shake the pieces into a pattern, he understood what had to be done. Still dressed in yesterday's clothing, he crept to the doorway where he lingered to watch the two most beloved things in the world to him sleeping peacefully.

Melissa had intervened in time. Jasmine hadn't been poisoned by him. But Trent could not run the risk of such a thing happening again. The indifference of the universe, which had somehow come to house itself in his heart, had to remain his alone. He could not let it leak out to spoil his loved ones.

He slipped outside and began to walk. He tried to jog but found that his black lungs were strained even by the mildest activity. It was coming to a head much quicker than Trent had suspected.

It was still dark when he reached the empty bluffs. Isaac was likely enjoying a well-earned rest somewhere.

He found the chunk of blood-black glass that doubled as both marker and plug. He rolled it free, allowing fresh Darkness to geyser up and out, but only momentarily.

Trent climbed down into the pit and began to rake the cold earth down onto himself. The grains wedged themselves beneath his fingernails and they gloved his palms. He pulled down enough sand to keep him snug. Then he reclined his head and waited.

Pent with folded limbs and arched neck, Trent shut his eyes and tempered his breathing. The sand seemed to be grinding in his ears, chirping in the mad language of birds, or in the secret tongue of the Conqueror Worm.

The longer Trent lingered, the more acute his aerial sense became. In time he was able to see clearly, despite the narrow womb that would not spore him, despite his tightly shut eyes. He had been right. Melissa would never know it, nor, thankfully, would Jasmine, but he was right. Science had delivered Trent into this heart of darkness, but Nature had provided him with the means to save his family from this fate.

Trent's eyelashes were dewy. He could feel the Dark Matter gathering on his skin like some type of cosmic pollen. It was vacuum-cold, but Trent had already reached the point of acceptance.

Above, Isaac arrived and resumed his labours. A fresh quantity of beach sand was flung. As was his custom, Isaac did not look down into the pit as he worked. He knew well enough what was down there; something primordially impure, something that needed to be sealed in for good and all. He had lugged up fewer bags than usual, sensing perhaps that his chore was not as endless as he'd long believed. Intermittently he fingered the sigil around his neck.

Though neither man was aware of the other's presence, somehow, at that liminality where all thought dovetails, both men intuited that today, at long last, it would be accomplished. Today would be the end.

Black Ships Seen South of Heaven

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

Caitlín R. Kiernan is the author of eleven novels and more than two hundred short stories. Her novel The Drowning Girl: A Memoir received the Bram Stoker and James Tiptree, Jr. awards, as well as nominations for the Nebula, Mythopoeic, Locus, World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Shirley Jackson awards. Her short fiction has been collected in such volumes as Tales of Pain and Wonder, A is for Alien, and The Ape's Wife and Other Stories, and she recently returned to comics with Alabaster: Wolves for Dark Horse. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

*The clouds will part and the sky cracks open, And God himself will reach his fucking arm
through ...*

—NIN

BEFORE, IN THE TIME THAT WAS BEFORE, THIS WAS A city of the living and the whole. It was not a city of blank-eyed warriors and broken women and pregnancies mercifully terminated before fresh teratisms can be born. It was not wasted and besieged. There were no watchful ramparts, and Midway and O'Hare International ferried civilian traffic, because there was civilian traffic. Before. There were unguarded highways into the city, before the fall of Manhattan and Boston and D.C. and pretty much everything else bordering the Atlantic, from Greenland to Tierra del Fuego. Before the city became a pounding ring of field, medium, and heavy batteries, 105 mm howitzers, 155 mm, 203 mm, antiaircraft and rocket artillery. Before the sea turned black and engulfed the East, and before the waters of Lake Michigan froze over with jaundiced ice that's immune to the heat of burning skies and molten shores.

Before the probe came home from the Kuiper belt, when it was never supposed to come home at all.

Before the beginning of the war.

The beginning of The End, which some will say is the simply the Beginning. Even within the ragged fortress of Chicago, there are zealous priests and necromancers who pray day and night to the Old Things for the fall of all mankind. They have the books. They know the names. They spill blood on secret altars. Agents of the Guard hunt them, but it's a hunt as futile as stalking the swarms of rats and the dogs and cats gone feral and vicious.

The once-were names for the days have been discarded.

This is Thunderday.

And on this Thunderday, Susannah takes her weekly turn on the eastern wall, with all the others who come on at dawn. She hardly ever sleeps anymore. She can, in fact, only just recall the last time she slept more than one or two hours at once. It's better that way; the dreams that are no longer merely dreams are kept at bay by wakefulness. But because insomnia weakens, the infirmaries handed out amphetamines and methamphetamine as long as the supplies lasted. Which wasn't long. Besides, Susannah recalls that the drug-induced hallucinations that visited her after several drugged days without any sleep at all were almost as bad as the nightmares.

“Stay sharp,” the Captain of the Guard says as she settles into one of the plastic patio chairs tucked inside the concrete pillbox. As if it’s necessary to remind her, but she supposes he has to say *something*, so she’s never complained. Futility is the rule After, not the exception.

She smokes stale tobacco and listens to the skinny kid from what used to be Elmwood Park, back when, back before the crimson drifters and the rain that sets fires. Back before. Before that island rose up from the South Pacific, from very near that oceanic pole of inaccessibility—the point on the planet farthest from any landmass. Near to Point Nemo. 47° 9′ S 126° 43′ W. And maybe you didn’t know jack shit about geography before, but now those coordinates are etched into the mind of the survivors, as indelible as their own names. The zealots and the enemies of man call it R’lyeh. Susannah just calls it Hell.

“Sue, you see that?” asks the Elwood kid. She wishes he wouldn’t call her Sue, because that’s what her mother called her. But she always lets it go. The kid’s pointing across No Man’s Land towards Indiana. “You see that?”

She picks up the one pair of binoculars allotted to the pillbox and tries to spot whatever it is the kid thinks he saw. But there’s only the glistening polychromatic canopy of the forest that presses in at the walls and stretches away, seemingly, forever.

“I don’t see anything,” she replies, and he curses.

“I know what I saw.”

“Then why don’t you tell me, and then we’ll both know?”

But he doesn’t. He sulks, instead. He sits in his patio chair reading an old paperback, neglecting the job that insures him room and rations.

Susannah knows better, but she lets the binoculars linger on the forest. The stalks of fungus that once were men and women, back before the plague. Before. Not that it’s well and truly over. But most people in the city talk about the plague as if it were something that’s come and gone, and they do their best to ignore the infected who cower in the alleyways and deserted husks of buildings. They stay indoors or in the bunkers on days when the prevailing winds bring clouds of spores north. They stay inside until the decon teams have done their best to scrub away the microscopic contagion. If they find a growth on their own bodies, they keep it a secret as long as they can. They cloak themselves in denial. Which is how Susannah has

made it through the last month, since she found the shiny wet spot on her left hip.

Only a matter of time now, but so is everything else.

It's all winding down.

The world has known the war is lost for years, since the nukes that failed to scratch the pillars of that vast island that shrugged off the sea. Since the fireballs and fallout failed to do anything but piss off the titans that stride across the world, bringing havoc at their leisure.

Susannah wishes that the ceaseless movement of the forest were only an illusion created by distance and the heat haze. But she knows it's no mirage. She knows all those men, women, and children who've been assimilated, absorbed, transformed, what the fuck ever, are still alive and still conscious and still in agony. As she will be soon enough.

She knows too much of what the CDC and WHO and etcetera learned before the airwaves and satellites went silent.

The Survivors' Prayer: Lord, let me be ignorant.

But she's an atheist. Susannah has no prayer.

"They're not gods," she said on the Worstday she met the boy when he wouldn't shut up about the monsters. "They're just shit from other places. That's all they are."

Maybe it's easier to accept The End if it's being brought by a malevolent pantheon than by indifferent aliens. She wouldn't know.

"I don't see anything," she says again, right as the sirens go off. She still jumps at the sirens, as if they meant something more than the opening of the southern gates to send the latest batch of fungal terminals out to join those who have gone before them. She always jumps as if it were ebony wings bearing down on the city.

"Jesus, Sue. Get a grip," the boy tells her, not even looking up from his paperback.

She tells him to go fuck himself, flicks the butt of her cigarette away, then trains the binoculars on the asphalt scab of I-394, Forest Road. There are only a couple dozen today. Susannah watches as they stagger away towards writhing stalks and the shadows below the enormous iridescent caps. She watches for five, ten, maybe fifteen minutes. It's easy to lose track of time on the wall.

She knows that forest all too well. Susannah arrived with one of the last groups of refugees, and the convoy came much, much too near to the fruiting bodies. She was sixteen then. Her mother had died back in Ohio. Her father had not even made it out of Boston. That was five years ago. Five years and spare change. Back when stupid motherfuckers and military strategists still talked about offensives, pushing back, *winning*.

They called the invaders gods, and they talked about winning.

It's one of the sickest jokes Susannah knows.

The moon rises like a boil, bloated, livid. No one bothers asking anymore how the moon can rise when the sun never seems to set.

"Did you hear that?" the Elmwood kid asks, dropping his paperback, his eyes all at once wild, but looking at her instead of looking out over the wastes.

"I didn't hear anything," she says, which is true.

He's silent a moment, then says, "They've left us alone for almost a week. You know this can't go on, Sue. You know they must be planning something big."

"Go back to your book," she replies.

"I heard wings," he all but whispers.

"Go back to your book."

"I swear to god, Sue, I'm putting in a request for a new partner. I'm not joking with you."

"You do that. But right now, you shut up and go back to your book."

"I swear I'm going to."

"Fine with me."

She wants to tell him not to bother. She wants to confess her infection. Her hip itches constantly, and she knows that in another week or two she'll be one of the alley lurkers, and by next month she'll be staggering out the gate, unable to resist the siren song, dragging what's left of her body towards the forest. Maybe the kid will watch her go. Maybe he'll even recognize her.

Probably he won't.

She's never recognized any of those who've left to take their places as part of that vast colonial organism.

Susannah still remembers the TV broadcasts in those first few weeks after the island rose, after the earthquakes and tsunamis that devastated

coastlines and erased cities on both sides of the Pacific. Quakes measuring 9.9+, possibly one or two as strong as 12.0, exceeding the parameters of Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg scale. Quakes so strong they broke apart the atomic structure of stone. She remembers watching on CNN and MSNBC, the floods, the fire, the few blurred, grainy bits of footage that were ever filmed of the coast of R'lyeh before there were no longer any ships left to sail the bruised-black seas. Susannah even recalls an interview with two physicists who attributed the inability of video to capture clear footage of the island's titanic monoliths to the bending of light rays by the angles of poorly understood geometries and "physics beyond the standard model." Her dad had said it was all a load of crap, that no one had any idea what was happening, and she's inclined to agree with her dead father.

New Horizons returned, ignoring its programming and using Pluto for a gravitational slingshot back towards the inner Solar System, hurtling across near vacuum and cold and all those millions of miles back to earth. The probe crashed somewhere in the Sahara, or the Caspian Sea, or Scandinavia. No one was ever certain, as tracking stations seemed to show it coming down in multiple locations.

But it returned with secrets, and the scientists could grasp at straws forever and never have one iota what those secrets were. *New Horizons* returned, and R'lyeh rose, and the one sleeping there awoke.

And The End began.

Or the Beginning.

Susannah remembers those grainy clips, played over and over until all the channels all went off the air, and her family joined the steady stream of refugees heading inland. She even recalls the final broadcast, and what emerged from those strange angles into the light of day. Just a distorted hint of its impossible bulk glimpsed between crackling bursts of static. She remembers the screams.

She asked questions that her parents would never answer, but she had the TV and Twitter and Facebook, while they lasted. All the contradictory reports, the events that were only explicable if one were willing to believe the inexplicable. News of the friends and family who died or simply vanished. So many people vanished so quickly there was no way to keep track. Here one day, gone the next. Here one hour, one minute, then poof.

The conspiracy nuts, fringe theorists, and pseudoscientists had a field day, their fifteen minutes in the sun. It was their moment to shine, because, obviously, this was all the result of top-fucking-secret black-ops NSA DOD ESA CIA NASA acronym, acronym, acronym ancient astronaut Roswell Area 51 chemtrails secret electromagnetic directed-energy weaponry cold goddamn fusion and strangelets spawned by the Large Hadron Collider and, and, and HAARP program disruptions in the ionosphere and the ghosts of John F. Kennedy, Nikola Tesla, and Madame Blavatsky. They all ran together just exactly like that in Susannah's mind, like melted steel. Naturally, the religious end-timers got a word in edgewise. This had to be the Rapture, the Second Coming, the opening of the Seven Seals, what the hell else could that thing that crawled forth from the New Land be *but* the Antichrist?

There were a few who went so far as to propose that *all* conceivable claims were true. They embraced.

Five years farther on, in the ruins of Babylon, she and the Elmwood kid sit in the pillbox. She watches, and he reads. At precisely 13:00 hours a "squadron" of the blood-red driftgliders appears to the south, swooping low above No Man's. They shimmer wetly, those wings a hundred feet from tip to tip, those insectile heads, the tails that trail out behind them throwing blue-white sparks of electricity. Minutes later, there's the dull *whup-whup-whup* of a modified National Guard UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter. It goes as near to the driftgliders as it dares, but never engages, never opens fire.

She watches it all through the binoculars. The Elmwood kid only looks up for a few seconds.

At 15:07 something on towering stilt legs strides through the mushroom forest. She reports it, but HQ O'Hare says it isn't a clear and present danger. Just neofauna. But she notes the walker in the logbook, anyway. Susannah even sketches a decent likeness of the creature. It calls out across the wastes with a cry like all the foghorns ever built. Maybe it's lonely and looking for a mate. Maybe it's praying. She isn't curious enough to ponder the problem for very long.

"That's it for me," the kid says at 16:55, even though they won't be relieved for another twenty minutes. "There's meatloaf tonight," he says and grins, tucking his book into a pocket of his coat.

“How can you eat that shit?” she asks. It comes heavy on the loaf and light on anything that can be called meat, just enough Spam or Vienna sausage to create the illusion, and all the rest grain and Crisco filler from the rapidly dwindling stores.

“Gotta eat something,” he replies. “There’s worse. Then again, maybe you ain’t never been down that low, Sue. Maybe you never were a scrounger before your paperwork went through and you got the wall.”

And sure, that’s true, though she doesn’t like the tone in the Elmwood kid’s voice when he reminds her. She waited out quarantine in the camps, then pulled various shit civil service and Army duties before finally rising up the ranks. All she had to keep her sane was ambition. That and her own secrets, which she will never share with the Elmwood kid. Even without the infection, even if she had all the time in the world, she’d never share those secrets. *New Horizon* had its mysteries, and Susannah has hers, which are even more secret than the probes because no one suspects that she *has* secrets.

She doesn’t let the kid leave early.

* * *

Technically, Susannah bunks with the other members of the Guard in the barracks at the converted State Street Subway tunnel. That’s what her ID badge says, and that’s where she takes most of her meals. But she isn’t the only person who seeks other lodgings from time to time. Her rank gives her a freedom of movement not afforded to civilians. The curfews don’t apply, and she has very little trouble at checkpoints.

The stingy luxuries that keep people at their posts, gazing out across the horrors of No Man’s Land.

Fringe benefits.

Susannah has claimed a basement room below what once was the Biograph Theater. Dillinger was shot dead just outside the theater, way, way back before. But some people still remember that. A lot of people squat in the derelict movie palace, and sometimes there are gatherings and meetings of one sort or another that use the stage. The squatters don’t ever seem to mind. It’s something to break up the grinding tedium here at the end of the world. But none of the Biograph’s other inhabitants or occasional

interlopers ever fuck with Susannah. She's painted the Mark of the Guard on her rusty steel door, and that keeps them away in droves.

There is a second mark, down low. Bottom left-hand corner, near the hinges that creak and strain every time the door is opened and closed.

A mark no larger than a dime.

It's another secret in a the dregs of a world that has all descended into secrets. If military intelligence could ever learn this secret, then the city might stop rotting from the inside out. A drop in the bucket of the tide might be turned. Might. It's the sign of the Eyes and Mouths and Hands of the Black Pharaoh. He has many names, many titles, but that's the one Susannah prefers, even if she can't say why. Perhaps because so many of the others are all but unpronounceable. She used a Swiss army knife to carve the symbol there herself, almost two years back now, after she first glimpsed the tall, dark man lingering in the doorway of a burned-out house in Sheridan Park. He saw her, as she saw him. He looked into her, and she glimpsed the thinnest rind of the truth of it all. Just the oily scum floating on the surface, but that was more than enough to seduce.

Now she is among the hundreds in the city who have answered his call, and that seems a far, far greater purpose than numbering among the paper tigers who go through the motions of watching over the ignorant, the unseeing, the souls just counting off the days until deaths or fates much worse than death. Unlike them, her existence has *true* meaning, even if only a shred.

There isn't much to her room below the stage. A few pieces of furniture she dragged in down the stairs: an old office chair, a loveseat upholstered in tatters of mildewed linen, a television set that was already there when she claimed the place, a hotplate, an Army cot, a wobbly table (one leg's too short) heaped with books and unbound pages, and a ceramic coffee cup filled with pens and pencils. One side of the cup has the glowering face of a red bull printed on it and THE CHICAGO BULLS. The horns of the bull form the U in BULLS. The only light comes from the stubs of candles that she hoards, and that she only lights when she needs illumination. Most of her time here is passed in complete darkness.

As, Susannah knows, is appropriate.

The ceiling is low enough that she can reach it by standing on the Coleman cooler she scavenged from the ruins of a sporting-goods store.

And there on the cement ceiling is the place that she's creating her celestial map, which is, of course, more than a mere map. When it's finally finished, at that undisclosed but nonetheless appointed hour, it will also be a hole.

That word, *hole*, is entirely inadequate to describe what she's slowly, slowly, slowly fashioning. Just as all the names and epithets worn by the Black Pharaoh are entirely inadequate. In her mind, she can see what she's making, piecemeal, on the ceiling, because He showed her.

Hole.

Breach.

Tear.

Whatever.

When she left the wall, she and Elmwood boy going their separate ways until next week, she went to her hiding place below the Biograph. She sits on the loveseat, trying to ignore her itching, infected hip, and listens to the ticking of the alarm clock, which she also keeps on the wobbly table, perched atop a crooked stack of books capped off with *Quantum Mechanics and Experience*. She's always careful to wind the clock whenever she leaves the room below the stage, checking it against the wristwatch supplied by the Guard. She listens and waits impatiently. In the darkness, it's easy to lose track of time. The tick, tick, ticking of the clock seems to do more to blur moments than to delineate, and so she sometimes wonders why it's so important to her to keep it wound. But eventually she hears heavy, shuffling footsteps coming down the corridor. They stop just outside the room, and then there's a protracted moment of silence before the faint, dry sound of an envelope being slipped beneath the door. Sweating, her heart pounding, almost too anxious to breathe, she waits until the footsteps have retreated back the way they came before she lights the candle.

It's an envelope sealed with a few drops of yellow wax stamped with the same mark scratched at the bottom left-hand corner of her door. Susannah crouches over the envelope, almost reluctant to touch it, even now, when she can no longer recall how many times this ritual has been repeated. It isn't necessary to hold a thing in one's hands in order to recognize the significance with which it has been imbued. She reaches down, her fingers no more than an inch or two above the paper, but she hesitates. Susannah suspects that they all hesitate, the ones who have seen the Black Pharaoh

and been chosen to receive these significant messages sealed with yellow wax.

“Do you mean to wait all night?” a voice whispers from a corner of the room, an inky spot where the unsteady flame of the candle isn’t reaching. But Susannah knows that the candlelight wouldn’t brighten that corner even if she walked over and stood there. Something in the corner is immune to light. She isn’t sure if that something was there when she found the room, or if it followed her. She isn’t sure if all the disciples have black corners and voices that speak to them from black corners.

Still crouching, Susannah looks over her shoulder, peering at the corner even though she knows there’s absolutely no chance of seeing who or what is there.

“When I was seven,” she says, “we took a vacation to Yosemite, a camping trip. It was summer, and I lay on the hood of the car. Just me and my father, staring up at the stars. He would point to one and tell me its name. What astronomers called it.”

“Astronomers were always arrogant fools,” the voice tells her, “thinking they could name a star.”

“I’d never seen anything like it. The whole sky seemed bathed in white fire. The Milky Way stretched from one horizon to the other.”

And, she thinks, the sight of them absolutely fucking terrified you, though you never told Dad that. You wanted to crawl beneath the car and hide there until sunrise when there would only be that one familiar star, close and warm.

She says, “He pointed out the specks that were Mars and Venus and Jupiter.”

Susannah can hear whatever speaks to her from the corner smile. It smiles in a way that can *be* heard. “Be grateful to his memory, then. He paved your way to glory. He set the stage that night.”

“He taught me about the speed of light,” she replies, even if it isn’t a proper reply. “He told me a lot of those stars had died billions of years before we looked up and saw them.”

That was the first night she understood how small she was, how her only perfection would ever lie in her perfect insignificance in the face of all that universe stretched out above her.

“You should open the envelope,” the voice says.

I wanted to crawl beneath the car and lie with my face pressed to the ground. That sky was hungry, and I expected that any moment I would fall up, up, up—forever falling into its jaws.

“You’d not even be a crumb,” says the corner. It knows the way into her head, so when it hears her thoughts and answers them she isn’t ever surprised. “Doesn’t mean the sky would spare you, but you wouldn’t make a decent morsel. Heaven eats entire galaxies and is still ravenous.”

Which reminds her of one of the last newscasts before there were no more newscasts and never would be. One of those foolish astronomers described the discovery of an apparent black hole between Saturn and Neptune. He talked about X-ray emissions, the event horizon, and accretion disk. He talked about the death of planets.

“There are no paths that lead away from the black hole.”

The scientist might have said that, or it may only be a false memory.

The sky is eating us alive.

“The clock is ticking,” says the voice, not meaning, specifically, the clock on the table. Meaning, of course, a clock so vast as to be inconceivable.

Her hip itches like hell, but she doesn’t scratch it. She picks up the envelope and carries it to the table. She uses a thumbnail to peel back the sticky yellow wax, which smells very faintly of honey. There is an expensive-looking piece of stationery inside, folded over once. As always, the message has been composed in sepia, writing that looks old-fashioned, and Susannah always has imagined that the messages are each written out with an antique fountain pen.

Each man and woman who receives these envelopes has also received a key to a cryptographic code. No two of these ciphers are identical. She spent a week memorizing hers, then destroyed the ruled index card on which it had been written. Just for her. The Black Pharaoh speaks joyfully in an endless parade of languages learned from his father, and so he has one to spare for each of his chosen.

“You are a special snowflake,” sneers the voice, and she tries to ignore it, but that works about as well as trying to ignore the prickling irritation where the fungus has taken root in her flesh. “You are a unique butterfly,” laughs the voice.

Susannah reads the message over several times, and then several times more to be certain that she's worked it out precisely right. She isn't permitted to copy it down as she decodes the encrypted equations and stellar coordinates; she has to hold it all in her mind. Copies are much too dangerous when there are so many out there trying their damndest to ferret out the servants of the tall, thin man who waits in doorways for lost sheep. And as soon as she's certain she's got it right, before she climbs atop the ice chest with blue Sharpie in hand, she has to burn it. Not after, which is why she has to be more sure than sure can be that she's made not even the most minute mistake. She touches one corner of the stationery to the candle's flame, and the paper catches and burns. She drops it onto the floor and waits until nothing remains but ashes. The whole floor of the room is carpeted in a fine grey layer of ash, smeared beneath her bare feet. She'll leave wearing ash. She always does.

"Your own moveable feast," the voice in the corner whispers. "Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return."

Star dust.

"In the end," the voice reminds her, "not even that much will remain."

Susannah needs only fifteen minutes to copy the message onto the concrete ceiling. The Guard can hide inside their pillboxes and lob mortars at the demons who/that come too near the city. The jets and helicopters can fire their air-to-air missiles at the driftgliders and the polyp clouds. The infantry can spray all the napalm it wishes. Let them. Because *this* is where the real offensive strikes of the war are being executed and carried out, in this dark, musty room and countless others like it all around the globe.

The tip of the marker squeaks as she draws lines to connect the dots between stars that only foolish men would try to name. She is laying a minefield. She is building a siege engine.

* * *

Susannah only *hardly* ever sleeps. If her insomnia were complete, that would be a mercy. Because even a woman touched by the hand of that tall, dark man to hasten The End, even such a woman as that, as Susannah, is not immune to fear. To terror. To dread. To be a whirlwind's concubine is not to be immune from the wind. And, long after midnight, when she has

finished with the instructions delivered to her cramped room below the Biograph Theater, she extinguishes the candle and sits down to rest in the loveseat. She only means to get her breath, to clear her head, for the translation, transcription, then the act of laying down those new pieces of his stratagem has left her as drained as it always does.

But, there in the comforting arms of the darkness, thinking of the wall and No Man's Land, of the forest and the Elmwood kid, she slips.

She sleeps.

She dreams.

No one is spared in dreams.

There is no protective ward against the revelations riding on the double-helix of REM and NREM, spat up and out by the amygdala and limbic system to come crawling up from the recesses buried deep in the convolutions of grey matter. In her dreams, Susannah has never been *aware* that she's dreaming, never in all her life; that would be another sort of mercy. The worlds of her dreams—before and after the return of *New Horizons* and the sundering of reality—have always, always, always been as authentic as her waking world.

She walks along a boulevard that seems to have no beginning and no end. The shells of dead buildings rise up tall on either side of the street, and every empty window frame is another eye. Above Susannah, the sky seethes red with unopposed squadrons of driftgliders. The asphalt beneath her bare feet is sticky, as if it has either never cooled or is melting again. She's going somewhere, even if she could never say where that might be. She can hear distant artillery, the impotent booming of howitzers. But there is no one here to make a stand. This place, she knows, has fallen to chaos.

The itch from her infection is maddening, and has spread from her hip all the way down to her leg and across her belly. But she doesn't scratch, because that only spreads it faster, and she still has so much work to do before she joins the others in the forest.

"Is this the very last day?" she asks, uncertain whom she intends the question for and not expecting an answer.

"No," says a voice very close behind her. It sounds like her mother's voice, but she doesn't turn or even look over her shoulder to see. "No, Susannah. It's not quite as far along as that. On that day, the stars will wink

out, one by one. Isn't that what you're doing when you draw on the ceiling? Erasing the stars?"

"Then there are still stars up there, behind the monsters?"

"Watch where you put your feet," says the woman who may or may not be her dead mother. "Watch your step. There are no maps here."

"No one repairs the roads anymore," Susannah replies.

And then she's come to a crucifix welded together from rusted steel girders, and hung there with coils of baling wire and with railroad spikes is the Elmwood kid. He isn't dead yet. Like Christ at Calvary, he stares Heavenward, as though he might yet be delivered.

"No one's coming for us," she tells him.

There's a happy ring of ebony beetles dancing about the base of the cross, singing ebony beetle songs of sacrifice. She thinks about crushing them beneath her heel, all of them, so at least the boy could suffer in peace.

"We'll see," the Elmwood kid whispers through blood and a mouthful of broken teeth. "Nothing is certain. Ain't that the New Rule?"

"Nothing is new about uncertainty," she tells him.

His blood is the same color as the bellies, throats, and the undersides of the wings of the driftgliders.

The Elmwood kid says, "I'll go for all of them, because there must be someone who will go for all of them."

"Who said that?" she asks the Hanged Man.

"I did. Just now."

"No. Someone said it before you."

And this is when she sees that there are dozens and dozens of other crucifixes—hundreds, possibly—stretching away along the boulevard before her. *This is*, she thinks, *the Road of Needles. The Road of Infidels.*

"Go away, witch," he says. "I'm dying. I don't want you to be here when I die."

She walks along the shore of the risen island on the very afternoon that it emerged, when it still dripped with the silt and slime of the seafloor. Heaps of hagfish, ratfish, brittle stars, and sea cucumbers squirm around her ankles, but she feels no revulsion whatsoever. Her back is to R'lyeh, with its warped spacetime and tortured geometry, that utterly alien architecture where the sleeper was imprisoned three hundred million years before the rise of mankind, as the continents slammed one against another in the birth

throes of Pangaea and the first tiny reptiles scurried beneath the boughs of steaming Carboniferous jungles.

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.

No, sing that song no more. He is awakened.

A sanguine sea laps at the basalt shore.

The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

There are fleets of destroyers and aircraft carriers out there, the ships of war, bobbing like toys in a bathtub. Soon enough, the sleeper, no longer sleeping, will wipe them all away, send them straight down to the bottom of the ocean. The bombs begin to fall, shot out of submarines and silos in China, Nebraska, Russia, India. The clock on a crooked stack of books in a concrete room below Chicago ticks, and then all the world is made of light and fire.

The fire is a path into cool shade.

Holocaust to blessed, perpetual gloom.

This is the day when gates open for Susannah, when the plague fungus has eaten enough that there's more of it than her. Now she only ever dreams of the gulfs out beyond Pluto and Charon. What's left of her brain is soothed by narcotic effects of the spores coursing through the sludgy remnants of her bloodstream. So there's no more pain. There will never again be pain. She goes to the forest with a dozen staggering others. She walks the shadowed lanes between stalks that would put redwoods to shame (if any redwoods still grew). And she finds her place among those who have come before her, a gaping wet vulvic nook in one of the stalks, and she allows that honeyed cleft to receive her. If this is Dante's Wood of the Suicides, William Blake's Forest of Self-Murderers, at least there are no harpies to tear at the bodies of the damned.

And there is peace in unity.

* * *

All wars end, even this last war. Even this wholesale massacre, as it can never truly be said to have been a war. As Mr. Wells wrote, "bows and arrows against the lightning." And many weeks later, many wax-sealed

envelopes later, many nightmares later, many turns at the wall later, on a Sighday the end of this war does finally arrive.

Susannah watches from the ramparts as the wave rolls across the land, crushing, obliterating, consuming everything in its path. The wave is as high and wide as the sky. It isn't a wave of water. It moves so slowly that there was time for news of it to reach the city days before it became visible, rolling in from the southwest. From, she supposes, the direction of R'lyeh. Of Hell. Some have fled the city, bound for the deserts that once were Wisconsin. But those refugees are few, a scattered parade of the last enclaves of Hope and Determination. They are the doomed unwilling to accept an impending fate, and so Susannah can only think of them as cowards. Better to stand here and bear witness at the conclusion of human history. The wave is a theater curtain drawing shut after the actors have taken their final bows and retreated to the wings. If asked, she would have to admit that the sight of it is not unwelcomed. After more than five years, almost a quarter of her life, Susannah is ready, and she has done her part to usher in this moment.

"It can't be real," the Elmwood kid whispers in a whisper that is more awe than terror. "Sue, It can't be real."

"It's real," she assures him. "Few things have ever been more real than that."

He raises his left arm and points towards the place where the horizon used to be.

"Nothing can be that ..." But then he trails off.

"In its way," she says, "it's beautiful." She stands, moving in an effort not to scratch at the welts and boils and spongy tissue that has spread from her hip across her belly, between her legs, up her entire back. In the old days, no one with such an advanced stage of the plague would ever have been permitted to remain on the wall.

But beggars can't be choosers.

The wave oozes forward, rolling inch by inch by inch.

Her final envelope simply called it Shuggoth.

Despair, for by your hand comes the annihilator even of time, and those once rebels who were legion have been made whole and imbued with inconceivable intent, and the name placed upon it is Shuggoth.

The Black Pharaoh has allowed her to play a role in this extinction. The lines, angles, and remaining interstices marked off on so many secret walls within the city, they are all, in their way, midwives and heralds of the wave. As a reward, those who crafted them will pass from the cosmos, or, more accurately, into the post-cosmic void, with some small part of their dignity intact. Of course, this gift is a subjective perception and nothing more; the star-born harbingers of oblivion—conceived outside the quantum-foam cradle of this universe—offer no gifts, no favors to the faithful.

No one mans the howitzers. No jets are scrambled for a closing show of defiance. There is not even panic in the streets. The people who have remained in the city have accepted what is coming, and now there is only the waiting. They have a few more hours at the most.

The Elmwood kid points at the sky now. When Susannah looks up, she can see that the stars are winking out, one by one.

The Dark Sea Within

JASON V BROCK

Jason V Brock is an award-winning writer, editor, filmmaker, composer, and artist, and has been widely published online, in comic books, magazines, and anthologies, such as Butcher Knives & Body Counts, Weird Fiction Review, Fungi, Fangoria, S. T. Joshi's Black Wings series, and many others. His first collection, Simulacrum and Other Possible Realities (Hippocampus Press, 2013), was widely praised, and his nonfiction book Disorders of Magnitude (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) is a wide-ranging study of weird literature, film, television, and comic books.

1

CHRISTMAS EVE

DAVID WAS HARD-PRESSED TO REMEMBER WHEN THE obsession first asserted itself.

Isn't that always the way it is with such things? he mused. One could never pinpoint the precise day, the exact moment, the split-second when your life stopped being your own and began to be lived, instead, in the servitude of some other aspect of the universe—maybe a person, an object, perhaps even another consciousness.

Regardless, he reckoned it hardly mattered *when* curiosity had become necessity; all obsession was rooted in perversion of some sort or other, and most, in that dark sea within themselves, had their personal fixations; of that he was certain. Still, he preferred to think of his interests as *preoccupations*, however unorthodox. And was it really a perverse thing to want to be rich and successful? So it took more energy than most were willing to muster: he could live with that. Let the others be schleppers and also-rans; that was not his way.

Of course, there could be downsides to risk-taking ...

“When are we supposed to be there?” Delia asked, looking up from the map book. Her voice was edged, tired. He smiled at her, glancing away from the hypnotic repetition of the road stripe as it stretched to the darkening horizon.

“As long as we arrive by tomorrow afternoon. The owner is holding off selling anything until we get there. Illya, the gallery owner, mentioned that the person selling the pieces would accommodate our travel schedule, since they’d heard of us. Someone named Januuz. I think it’s a last name.”

Delia replied with a subtle nod. “Some Christmas. I’d rather be back in the City than on some wild goose chase. What if they’re fakes?”

He frowned. “I doubt it. I’ve checked and rechecked the information he sent me. Cleared it with some of my connections, too. This guy is on the

level, and the price is right. Seems like the owner wants to unload them; probably tired of dealing with all the superstitious claptrap.” He paused, letting the road noise fill in the silence. “Besides, we’ve got no choice. If I don’t secure these *now*, we might never get the chance, and we’ll be stuck in that brownstone. If we’re lucky; that’s assuming the fucking Greco brothers don’t make good on having me killed.” He glanced at her again, renewing his grip on the steering wheel. The road ahead was empty.

It had been a bad state of affairs for some time with the Grecos. For years, they had been his biggest supporters as art dealers, even through the recessions, the failure of his filmmaking ventures, and the bursting of a few art market bubbles. Until, that is, the bad deal with the Hermitage. At the time, it had rocked the art elite: an undiscovered Jan Vermeer. It was the apogee of David’s career and netted a sizable fortune for everyone involved.

Eventually, however, the tide turned against them. The Vermeer that David had sold to the Hermitage, brokered by the Grecos, was determined to be an elaborate forgery. It had been kept quiet, as it was an embarrassment for everyone involved, but he had been told by the Grecos to return all the monies they had paid him or face their wrath. They had been forced to take the counterfeit piece back and reimburse the museum, or have their fifty-year legacy smeared all over the art world as charlatans. In a high-stakes business centered on expertise, reputation, and trust, this was an intolerable possibility; and they had the money and muscle to ensure that it would *not* happen.

The problem for David was that they had spent most of the millions over the ten years it took the Hermitage to authenticate the work: traveling, procuring new pieces for speculative sales, investing in the stock market. A few bad investments at that level were all it had taken to erode his finances to the point of being unable to oblige his erstwhile partners once the situation became clear. David explained that it was an honest mistake, but that was not enough for the Brothers Greco: Mistake or not, it had cost them in treasure and stature, and they were not just going to roll over on those points. David was able to land a few quick auction-house deals that helped, but it was insufficient to remedy the hurt feelings and financial angst felt by the Grecos; and in this profession, the possibility of litigation was not up to

conjecture. Retribution would come quietly, and it would be as unceremonious as it was final.

Over the past two years, Delia and David had been able to return a large portion of the proceeds, but the Grecos felt they had been patient long enough and informed them that if David failed to return the rest of the money in a time they all agreed upon, he left them with no other choice but to proceed with other plans to rectify the situation. Now, he was staring into the abyss of the end of that timetable: January 1.

“Plus,” David continued, breaking the silence, “we’d have enough left over after I settle up with them that we could finally afford to expand the unit.... Maybe buy out that creep next door.”

Delia sighed and turned to face the passenger window. She knew David was right: it was their only real option at the moment. Outside, the frozen ground was covered with a modest dusting of snow, and in the deep black sky a profusion of stars glimmered with cold, primordial fire. “Fine. I’m getting sick of the art world, though. It’s *crawling* with sleazy characters. I hope this is worth it.”

2

CHRISTMAS DAY: 11:43 A.M.

THEY ARRIVED IN PRAGUE AT TWO-THIRTY IN THE morning. It was unusually chilly, and the rental car seemed too large for the narrow lanes. After checking into their room in Old Town, they showered and then slept for a few hours.

Delia's mood had lightened considerably by the time they had eaten some breakfast. She seemed excited at the prospect of spending the New Year in Europe.

"Well, *you* sure are a changed woman," David said as they walked toward Jewish Town, his breath trailing behind them. That was where they had arranged to meet the proprietor of the art gallery: He had the paintings at an atelier near the Old Jewish Cemetery.

Delia smiled at him and squeezed his hand as they walked. "Wonderful what a little sleep and a trdelnik pastry can do." She paused, shivering. "Boy, it's really cold, though!" They both laughed as she tucked her ears under the multicolored knit cap his mother had given her on their fifth wedding anniversary, then pulled the long black scarf he had given her for her birthday up over her nose and mouth with a gloved hand before looping her arm with his and huddling closer. The day was bright and clear; as they walked the uneven cobbled streets of the medieval city, David was struck by how little had changed since their last visit, more than twelve years ago. Throngs of people crowded the shops and causeways, filling the air with an ethereal wash of noise. He scanned the street ahead, absorbing the blend of foreign languages, engine sounds, and music wafting over from near the waterfront area of the Vltava River.

As they walked closer to the Astrological Clock, the crowds grew thicker, and he detected the strong smells of street vendors preparing sausages with sauerkraut, spicy mulled wine, and fried cheese sandwiches. Rounding a corner, the narrow street opened into a plaza: the Old Town

Square. Just as they arrived at the Orloj, the figure of Death was striking the hour; an unkindness of ravens croaked their disapproval from the Old Town City Hall as though answering the ghastly automaton. The frigid wind sliced by, blowing a billow of exhaust from the food carts past them. David, eyes stinging from the smoke, stared at the clock, marveling at the garish colors of the background and the cryptic movements of the Zodiacal ring; it amazed him to think that he might literally be standing in the exact spot once trod by a young Franz Kafka.

“It’s beautiful,” he said to Delia at last, returning to the moment. She hugged his arm to her body.

“Yes,” she said, looking from his face to the Orloj. “And ominous.”

3

CHRISTMAS DAY: 1:51 P.M.

“SHIT. I’M LOST,” DAVID SAID. EVEN HE WAS STARTING to feel his hands getting stiff through his gloves, his feet going numb the farther they walked. Though he was dressed in layers, the intense cold had started to bite through, especially on his cheeks and nose. Delia had been a trouper so far, not saying a word as he referenced the address scribbled on a piece of paper.

The temperature seemed to drop as they got closer to the Jewish Quarter, Josefov. The brightly colored clots of merrymakers and townspeople were thinning out as it got colder, and, to make matters worse, a dense fog was rising from the river to mingle with the smoke of chimneys and the street vendors plying their trade. The overall effect was surreal, as muffled, half-glimpsed figures crept through the chilly cityscape like specters, and the dark shapes of the capital’s disorienting mix of Gothic, Baroque, Rococo, and Art Nouveau architecture by turns faded and reappeared all around them like passing ships in a sea of grayish white. The sun hung low in the now-overcast sky; in the thick mist, it resembled something more like a full moon.

“Maybe we should go back to the hotel, David,” Delia offered at last. “This fog is incredible.” She regarded him with her wide blue eyes; he could see she was worried. Far away, he could make out the distant chime of the centuries-old Orloj.

He nodded, feeling defeated, cold, tired. “Okay. I hate that we’ve come so far for nothing.... I—I’m sorry, Delia, this is all my fault. My fucking need to be number one; that’s what got us in this mess to start with. I didn’t check my sources well enough on the Vermeer buy. I *wanted* it to be the real thing, so I was too afraid to dig deeper.” He rubbed his face in despair. “And in the end it bit us in the ass. Now this.... I mean, how often does someone claiming to have unknown Hieronymus Bosch paintings come

around? I'll tell you: never." He stopped, letting the damp vapor fill his aching lungs. "Never," he softly repeated.

She gently took his hand in hers. "David, it's not for 'nothing.' I mean, we have this beautiful place, and we're here until after the New Year. Maybe we can visit your brother in Aix-en-Provence after we leave here. I mean, we might not be able to go back to the States. No one knows our itinerary, so we could just start over someplace." Delia stopped for a moment, as though the import of her words had just occurred to her. "Anyway, we can figure all that out later. Let's just make the best of it."

He smiled. "Okay. Can we walk one more block? Maybe I misread the address."

Delia's eyes widened and she stamped her foot in mock protest, hands on hips. "David!" She glared into the mist. "All right. *One* more block. Then back to the room." Her eyes narrowed mischievously: "I have plans for you, comrade."

He laughed as the fog shrouded them. That was one thing he had come to understand: When you had a passion—no matter how unusual—it was best to share it with someone who could understand it, good or bad....

And, for better or for worse, not only embrace the obsession, but accept it, as well.

4

CHRISTMAS DAY: 5:37 P.M.

“CAN YOU *BELIEVE* HOW WE SCORED?” DAVID ASKED, back in their suite. He was kneeling, shirtless in the foyer, looking at the pieces: multiple works in pristine condition, several of which appeared to be part of the same triptych. It was the find of a lifetime.

Delia watched him from the bedroom, wrapped in white linen, his sperm warmly trickling from between her legs. She smiled. “It’s quite something,” she said, her voice thick in her throat. The huge, unadorned window in their room revealed a wispy, completely fog-enrobed Prague.

“This is what we’ve *dreamed* of, D!” he exclaimed, his voice echoing lightly off the hardwoods. “If I sell this to the Prado or some other collector, we’ll be set for life. I mean, it’s *Bosch*. The master ...” He rubbed his hands together in excitement, then stood, gazing at the artwork. “Too bad Januuz was unable to be there for the deal, but so it goes. Maybe Illya and I can establish a relationship. He might come in handy for future deals, especially since he knows Russian. Lots of rich Russians nowadays. I’ll call the Grecos tomorrow and explain what’s going on, try to get started generating some interest from buyers. I think we’re going to be okay, baby!”

Delia fell over onto her back, relaxed, sleepy. She watched the fog as it flowed outside their window. “We did it, David. I love you!” She felt languid. It was beginning to get dark.

He walked into the room, removing his pajama bottoms, exposing his erection. Climbing into the futon with her, he kneaded her ample breasts, gently whispering in her ear as he eased into her again, helped by the slickness of his own previous ejaculation. She wrapped her legs around his lower body, pulling him greedily in, while he caressed the smoothness of her skin, tasted the saltiness of her neck.

After several minutes of thrusting, he was ready again. She rolled him over, riding hard until he moaned. “Now,” she whispered as his testicles

contracted and he spurted hotly into her, “*now* we can be a real family.... Just us, together. Without worries.” Then she kissed him deeply, crushing her body into him; he inhaled the perfume of her hair, and they fell into a peaceful sleep.

But it was not to last.

5

NEW YEAR'S EVE: 11:22 A.M.

NEARLY ONE WEEK LATER.

After some day-trips outside the city to visit the countryside, and a few other places of interest—such as the site of recent archeological digs from the Middle Ages and the ossuary in nearby Sedlec—they were back in Prague. New Year's Eve had been a long whirlwind of a day visiting merchants and seeing the sights. At one point, they were accosted by a lunatic claiming to be an angel while they explored St. Vitus Cathedral.

In order to distance themselves from that unsettling experience, they decided to tour the behemoth that was Prague Castle. Built in the ninth century, it was the largest such ancient palace in Europe; seated portentously upon the far hill overlooking the Vltava River like some crenelated headdress, it was a striking and imposing structure. It looked to David like the type of place that held many secrets—a place that might swallow you up and never allow you ingress back into the real world.

By evening, they were both spent, wanting nothing more than to relax in their room, drink wine, snack on cheese, and make love until the New Year arrived.

6

NEW YEAR'S EVE: 11:43 P.M.

A LITTLE BEFORE MIDNIGHT, THE TELEPHONE RANG.

“Haló,” David said into the receiver. “Yes, we’re still here. We’re scheduled to leave tomorrow night. What—” He was quiet for a long time. “I understand. Okay. I heard you: midnight. Sbohem.” He returned the handset to its cradle.

Delia looked at him, raising an inquisitive eyebrow as she pulled the sheet over her naked body.

“That was Illya,” he said. “Januuz. Januuz wants a meeting before we leave. Wants to see me face to face. I have to be at the statue of St. John the Baptist on the Charles Bridge in twenty minutes.”

Delia was incredulous: “*On New Year’s Eve?* Why didn’t Januuz bother to show up at the sale?” She shook her head in disbelief. “I *knew* this was too easy. Something isn’t right, David—”

He raised his hand to quiet her. “Illya said that Januuz is quite powerful. Said it would be easy to make our lives hard leaving the country if we refused. We don’t need that kind of heat.”

Delia collapsed back onto the bed in exasperation. “Fine. We’ll go together.”

7

NEW YEAR'S EVE: 11:57 P.M.

BATHED IN COLORED LIGHT, THE SKELETAL SPIRES OF the Castle grasped crookedly into the overcast night sky. A gentle dappling of snow began to cover the ground as the crisp air, scented with the sweet aroma of fried pastries from kiosks along the riverbanks, caused them to pull their lapels closed. The wide avenue of the Charles Bridge was jammed with noisy revelers, and it was difficult to move amidst the drunken knots of people ready to ring in the New Year.

As David led Delia through the festive scene to the statue, he was amused and disturbed by the assemblage of colorful and bizarre disguises that everyone wore: sinister plague-doctor beaks dueled with half-masked monsters; delicate Venetian-style full-faced works of art competed with cheap clear party coverings for attention as the noise and commotion grew louder.

They arrived at the base of the statue as the Orloj chimed in midnight. The entire bridge erupted in an incredible cacophony as fireworks shot into the sky, reflecting plumes of flame off the surface of the Vltava. The display was fantastic, casting dramatic shadows on everyone and silhouetting St. John against colorful streaks and pinwheels in the velvety sky. The harsh smell of black powder wafted over the scene as the whole bridge was illumined by blasts of pink, then red, then blue flashes of explosive light, booming out the arrival of the New Year all over the antique city of Praha. The snow had turned into a light drizzle, but there was no denying the excitement in the air and the enthusiasm of the crowd.

“Thank you for coming, David.”

David looked down from the mesmerizing spectacle at the cloaked figure in costume who was now standing next to Delia. The haunting apparition—someone dressed as a golem—took off their disturbing mask: It was Illya.

“Illya! What’s this all about?” David yelled over the roar of the pyrotechnics and the intoxicated celebrators. “Is Januuz here?”

Illya seemed troubled. He nodded, the black makeup around his eyes a strange contrast to his cropped, light-blond hair. Looking down to the ground, he motioned with a gesture of his arm, saying: “David, this is Januuz. I’ll leave you now. Shem!” With that, he vanished into the mob, grabbing Delia and dragging her with him as her screaming voice enfolded into the noise of the crowd.

“No! Delia! What’s happening!” Before David could follow them, Januuz appeared. He was a hulking figure dressed in black robes, and he blocked David’s way into the horde. Januuz’s mask was particularly gruesome: a twisted countenance with two faces, one fronting forward, though skewed, and the other offset to the rear. It was very convincing.

“We only come here once a year, David.” The voice coming from the mask was guttural, slow. The wide tongue licked the cracked lips on the forward mouth, leaving a silver slick. David stared at the man, his thoughts jumbled. At that moment, the second mouth screamed out: “It’s too late, David! We’ve changed our minds ...”

For an instant David felt queasy, and everything appeared to slow down; there was a salty taste in his mouth. Coppery. It was then that he knew two things: first, that the thing in front of him was not wearing a mask, and second, that he was dying.

The second countenance was withered, its expression frantic—eyes rolling in their sockets, nose flaring—as it continued: “You cannot change the past. Every man carries the seeds of his own destruction within him, like a secret.... It is too late for you. Sacrifices and changes must be made.”

“You are guilty,” the first aspect muttered matter-of-factly, then grinned, showing rows of sharp teeth. It blinked its heavily lidded eyes as the fireworks flared overhead. “Look around us, David. All these people ... They are all guilty of something, just like you. Some haven’t learned what yet, but they will, in due time, whether through their own realization or through our persuasion. When they do, we shall appear to them on our annual visit and lure them with their weaknesses, just as we did you.”

David could feel his sanity prying loose from his intellect. “What ... *are* you? A demon? An alien? A hallucination or a dream?”

“Do we look to be a dream?” the faces replied in unison, then laughed. Unison again: “We are a god. The god of time, and transitions ...”

In the distance, a mournful horn blared, adding a top note of sadness to the chaos on the Charles Bridge. In David’s overworked mind, the din of the crowd seemed to coalesce into a solemn requiem comprised of off-key chants, punctuated by dry drumbeats and the hollow clang of enormous, far-away bells. Crumbling to his knees, the great stone bridge was suddenly dark and barren except for Januuz and himself. Prague had become a vast land of nothingness.

As the New Year began, Januuz turned toward the Castle, and David followed, his past finally colliding with his future, and his time up at last.

Sealed by the Moon

GARY FRY

Gary Fry lives in Dracula's Whitby, literally around the corner from where Bram Stoker was staying while thinking about that character. Gary has a Ph.D. in psychology, but his first love is literature. He was the first author in PS Publishing's Showcase series, and Ramsey Campbell has referred to him as a "master." He is the author of more than 15 books, and his latest are the Lovecraftian novel Conjure House (DarkFuse, 2013), the short story collection Shades of Nothingness (PS Publishing, 2013), the zombie novel Severed and novellas Menace, Savage, and Mutator (DarkFuse, 2014).

“WHAT’S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT THIS PLACE, ANYWAY?” asked Glenn, pulling his Vauxhall into the campsite’s car park.

Lily didn’t immediately reply, just sat in the passenger seat looking directly forwards, at a rocky landscape stretching to a hazy horizon. She’d grown up in this area, and Glenn hadn’t been too surprised when she’d asked to spend her twenty-first birthday here.

Her voice as strange as Glenn remembered it after she’d first started taking medication, she said, “There’s a place I want you to see.”

This was progress, he thought, drawing upon the many counselling textbooks he’d read as a student, which frequently talked about disclosure of secrets and how this engendered trust.... But he wasn’t in that role this weekend; despite having met during his NHS work, he and Lily were now lovers and should behave like that.

“I look forward to it,” he replied, choosing not to be inquisitive. Lily would tell him more in good time. She could be like that, elusive and often confrontational, and again Glenn drew on professional experience by not rising to issues emerging from her subconscious mind. “Shall we unpack and get the tent up?”

If she was disappointed he hadn’t asked about the place she’d mentioned, she didn’t show it. For a moment, before switching off the grumbling engine and opening his door, Glenn thought he saw a curl of anger ripple along her upper lip, but then this expression was gone, replaced by the passive solemnity he’d come to associate with her family.

An only child, Lily had lived with her parents only a few miles north of this location, in a small North Yorkshire town where everyone knew one another’s business. More recently, her mum and dad had moved to Leeds, where Glenn had been born and now worked. A few months after this relocation, following a botched suicide attempt, the eighteen-year-old girl had been referred to him for support and guidance. They’d fallen in love after only a few sessions, Glenn was vulnerable to the intimacy of a first client and Lily admired his cool strength, non-argumentative nature, and—she’d told him only recently—tremendous height.

Glenn was six-foot-four and had been only mildly surprised to learn, after meeting the man, that her father was a similar height. There was

probably something Freudian at work here—an Elektra complex or some such—but Glenn had been trained as a general counsellor and not a dyed-in-the-wool psychoanalyst preaching according to Sigmund’s orthodoxy.

Lily’s mother had been a docile creature, given to apologies even in the absence of any perceptible misdemeanour. Whenever she’d served dinner, she’d say things like, “I hope the gravy isn’t too lumpy,” as if in anticipation of devastating disapproval. Glenn tried hard not to let his work dominate his private life, but he’d nonetheless found it strange how such a reserved man as the girl’s father could have such a timid, edgy wife, let alone a “loose cannon” of a daughter.

After carrying all their weekend gear across to a suitable spot for camping, Glenn watched his girlfriend roll one of the joints that she—in her own words—“simply couldn’t live without.” Since nearly OD-ing at a party in her late teens, she’d been prescribed by doctors an alchemist’s dream of potions and cocktails, yet none worked as well as her standard weed-and-nicotine combo. But Glenn didn’t mind, really. Sure, he was accountable in his career, but marijuana was hardly Class A stuff, was it? Besides, his private life had nothing to do with anyone else, and there were no rules against dating clients; it was merely frowned upon by colleagues, but they could all just bugger off.

Glenn enjoyed putting up the tent, using a heavy mallet to drive lethally pointed pegs into firm autumn earth. He wasn’t an aggressive man, which was perhaps the reason he was so suited to his career, the cut-and-thrust of psychological duels, that slippery process of transference. He and Lily had engaged in a number of intense sessions, during which he’d held her ostensibly sourceless anger, helping her to realise how non-destructive it was. This was extremely challenging, involving a firm identity and clear knowledge about where his boundaries lay. He guessed an over-possessive mother and distant father had offered him insight into these mechanisms, a nebulous knowledge of how people overlapped, their emotions grew entangled, and their actions were often mistaken for one another’s.... But again he was getting distracted by the minutiae of his working life. He as well as Lily was supposed to be relaxing this weekend, his first period of annual leave for months. And he was determined to do so.

“Let me have a smoke of that, will you?” he said, once the tent was fully erected and his girlfriend had lit up her second joint of the afternoon. It was

a cool, crisp day, the September daylight almost colourless. Other than themselves, just a handful of other couples occupied the site, mostly older, respectable-looking folk who probably thought the scent of Lily's smoke was a new perfume. Glenn reckoned most of them were a lot like his parents: polite, well-meaning, as green as all the grass here.

"Hey, you'll need it where I plan to take you," Lily replied, exhaling smoke with dragonish abandon. Her bohemian clothing—all wooden chains and garish amulets—rattled with her movement; her unmade-up face looked solemn and mysterious. "It might even help."

He stepped across to her, dropping the heavy mallet, which hit the soil beside the tent with a vicious thump. Then he reached for the joint.

He liked a beer, of course—what normal guy didn't?—but he'd never used such substances for anything other than mild relaxation, the pleasure of its taste. Pot was different, though; he enjoyed the dry, tender feeling it left in his throat, the sense of having more space around him it bequeathed. Hell, he'd spent most of his childhood in a small house in Leeds, and the great majority of his adulthood as a responsible trainee and then an even more responsible practitioner. But out here, where the hills climbed and fell, and rocks had stood for all time, it would be nice to open up a little, experiencing the world with all its edges exposed.

He took a deep drag on the roll-up, feeling smoke fill his mouth like dust. He sensed Lily watching him, a faint air of amusement animating her pretty face. Sometimes she looked so old at the same time as looking so young, and he wondered what that implied. He'd been treating her professionally for three years now and still felt as if he'd just scratched her surface.

Uncomfortable with feeling like the junior person here—he was twenty-four to her twenty-one—he met her green-eyed gaze and said, "So where is this place you plan on taking me to? And why the hell would you think I need help?"

Now she smiled properly, those lips curling north, like the sun arising during some primitive dawn. She'd been sitting on one of the collapsible stools they'd brought along with cooking gear and sleeping bags, but then quickly stood and snatched the joint back from him.

"Is the tent finished now?" she asked, between more hurried inhalations from the quixotic fire. "Can we just collapse in it when we return?"

“I’d just like to get all our stuff inside,” Glenn replied, sensing the drug already teasing the corners of his psyche, the way imps in ancient mythology were said to threaten fragile communities. “I mean, I know we’re in the middle of nowhere and with few ruffians around, but ... well, it’s better to be safe than sorry, isn’t it?”

Before meeting Lily and agreeing to let her live in his smart city centre flat, he’d assumed such rules in life were commonsensical, just practical watchwords to uphold. But more recently, she’d overturned all that.

“Oh, so *sensible*,” she said, her voice certainly containing an element of disapproval if not outright frustration. Glenn wanted to blame the dope, but the dismaying truth was that she could be even more like this when clear-headed. “You’ll be putting padlocks on the zip next.”

Actually, he did have a few small locks that secured the tent, but this wasn’t the time to allude to them. Nevertheless, he wouldn’t lose his temper; his professional persona suggested that this was what Lily was after, what she was *always* after, and he refused to give her that satisfaction. If he was ever successful in transforming the girl into the happy, contented person her parents clearly wanted—well, her mother, anyway; her father had always been strangely uncommunicative on the matter—he’d have to resist her invasive mind-games.

“Okay, then, bugger the stuff,” he said, those imps breaking into the village of his mind and rapidly colonising it. “Let’s go.”

She looked curiously pleased, especially when he picked up the mallet again and flung it along with several other items inside the tent without securing any of it.

Then he was ready. And Lily willingly led the way.

* * *

The North Yorkshire countryside was rich and strange. Glenn loved this time of the year, its wet periods and chilly fronts. When winds gusted—and today played host to a circus performance of them—a scent of wild vegetation and moist grass swept across the landscape, filling his mind with fond recollections of childhood episodes involving happiness, health, and hope. Everywhere felt ancient out here, as if the primitive brain, with its seething limbic core, now had evidence for its irrepressible nature. Trees

shook as they'd done since time immemorial; stone caves gaped, providing refuge from growling stalkers. Overhead, clouds scurried, great armies on the march, and the sinking sun kowtowed to a new kid in the area: the imperious moon appearing with all its mythological majesty.

Glenn was always enamoured by this kind of environment, despite having grown up in a city. He could well imagine what Lily's early life had been like, the alfresco freedom of unquenchable youth. But what had come between her and later success? Why had she developed a phobic reaction to maturity and mainstream life, as if a nuclear moment in her teens had torn a hole in her existence?

This was all Glenn knew about his girlfriend's suicide attempt: one moment she'd been dancing with so many other up-and-coming peers, and the next she'd been lying in a hospital bed with machines buzzing and beeping all around her. As long as Glenn had known her, she'd refused to discuss this dramatic event, but had always been happy to refer to her childhood, the days preceding this inexplicable attempt at oblivion, living with her parents in a village up north.

With the campsite way behind them and the makeshift pathway ahead deserted, Glenn considered this a good moment to question Lily, who, for all her cocky confidence, tended to open up only in absolute privacy.

"So," he said, puffing a little as they ascended a slope leading to a sequence of rocky hillsides, "where *are* we headed?"

He wanted to feel that this whole event—her birthday, the amazing location, just the two of them together—bore some kind of symbolic resonance, a journey into revelations, deep and true. But that surely required complicity, and he couldn't be certain whether his moody lover was willing to share his predilection for bone-shaking facts.

In the event, marching on ahead with a lingering smile of expectation, she said, "We're going to Mooncap Cave."

She left it at that, presumably attempting to pique his curiosity. And on this occasion, now alone in the brooding hills, he saw little harm in humouring her. "What's ... Mooncap Cave?" he asked, feeling both fretful about the spooky name and intrigued by what attracted her to this place.

Lily had now stopped smoking, but the substance she'd already imbibed must be pressing against her mind, because when she eventually replied, her

voice grew laboured, as if all the space out here was lending it a resonant quality, the way acoustics in a concert hall offered richness to sound.

“We used to come here when I was a child, me and Mum and ...”—a pause as she quickly drew breath—“and my dad.”

Glenn was sharp and had observed months ago how his girlfriend referred to her parents differently. His docile mother, with her reticent nature, was addressed as “Mum,” the pronoun’s capital letter almost audible. But her father—the taciturn, disengaged man who stood as tall as Glenn at well over six feet—was always called “my dad.” And the use of the single modifier “my” told Glenn a great deal about Lily’s relationships with her parents; this was a subtle thing, but straight out of a textbook. But now he must drill down into experience, get her talking in a way she rarely had in the past. Maybe this was a perfect opportunity.

“Go on, then,” he said, observing all the dark gathering overhead. Having reached the crest of a slope, they found themselves among a vast range of rocky land. He wouldn’t want to be stranded out here in as little as a few hours; neither he nor his girlfriend had brought torches. “Tell me more about Mooncap Cave.”

Glenn thought she’d hesitate again, weighing the relative risks and rewards of opening up to him. But then she began talking, making him believe that the drug in her blood had brought dark treasure to the surface.

“It’s an old story around these parts—older than the hills.”

She giggled like a schoolgirl, as if her opening comment had greatly amused her. Glenn suspected that both of her parents had once used this line, back in the days to which Lily now alluded.

“There’s a cave up ahead, and it has a hole in its ceiling that you can see straight through. The hole is circular, the same size as ... the same size as the *moon*.”

As Lily paused again, Glenn noticed many glitters appearing in the dimming sky, an extraordinary display of stars. There was no cloud this evening, which exposed the world to whatever aspects of the cosmos saw fit to damage it. And yes, here came the satellite to which his girlfriend had just referred: bloated, bloodless, and bonelike—the intense moon.

“So what?” Glenn replied, now feeling slightly uncomfortable. It wasn’t just because his girlfriend’s voice had grown less reticent; it was also that, at twenty-one years old today, she’d requested to spend the time here, in

such a barren part of the ancient world. That wasn't normal, was it? But of course nothing about Lily had ever been normal.

"Inside the cave *something* dwells," she went on, the smile in her tone almost palpable. "But only those tall enough to see the moon fill the hole in the ceiling will ever observe it. This thing is a god of desire, a master of rage, a spiritual advocate of every furtive taboo you or anyone else has ever considered."

In truth, Glenn had dwelt on few of those, having grown up in a conventional if rather stilted way. But was Lily now talking about her own family life? *Taboo*, he thought as they continued walking across an uneven plateau of age-old rock. *Desire. Rage ...* Glenn's discomfort began to escalate. Were events about to be referred to that strayed beyond the boundaries of his supposed expertise?

His girlfriend kept on walking, her slender limbs clearing every ostensible obstacle, as if the drug—no, *truth*—lent her impetus. Then she added, "My dad went in there once ..."—again, "my" dad and not simply "Dad"; Glenn observed this well—"and God knows what he saw, but when he came back out, he was ..." Lily hesitated again, raw emotion impeding her throat. But moments later, she finished, "When he came back out, he was a changed man."

"Changed ... how?" Glenn wanted to know, his professional interest now as aroused as his personal investment in Lily; in truth, he often wondered whether these were one and the same thing.

She refused to look at him, just continued striding over rocks. "There's something I've never told you. It's something I've never told anyone. Only Mum and I know. But now *you* should, too."

"Go on. I'm listening."

She laughed again, the noise harsh and mocking in such a motionless atmosphere. "Oh, I like your objective distance," she said, clinging to a chain around her neck, one of the weird amulets she'd once bought in a New Age shop. "You pretend it's for *our* benefit—you all do, everyone in the therapy game. But actually, I sometimes think it's for *yours*."

"You mean, to stop us from getting involved with clients?"

"If you like."

Now it was Glenn's turn to be audacious. He said at once, "Well, that's already happened in this case, hasn't it?"

He'd suspected the comment would knock her off-guard, and so it proved. Lily grew silent for a moment, as if addressing the vast sky. But then, her voice motivated again by a need for confession, she said, "My dad used to beat us up, both Mum and me. And very, very often."

Glenn was certainly shocked, he could admit that much, but he somehow kept his response calm and neutral. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Her laugh on this occasion sounded more like a scoff. "Hell, what's to tell? It's the usual male deal. In his case, a projection of unfulfilled desire. Seeking excuses to grow angry over a lack of opportunity to perform antisocial acts, whatever sad, common, and *dull* things these may be. Jesus, Glenn, you've read all the books. It ain't rocket science."

Something about her phrase caused Glenn to look up again at the moon, hanging in the sky like an indifferent face. Its eyes were craters, its mouth some tranquil sea. Then he glanced back at his girlfriend, but his only thought at this stage was to wonder whether her mother's apologetic nature, the way she'd disparage her cooking before guests had even tasted it, had a direct causal link to her husband's earlier behaviour. And if that was true, what on earth had this done to the child, to poor young Lily?

"We're *here*," his girlfriend announced, halting yards ahead of Glenn, her tone undeniably excited. And before Glenn could properly examine what appeared to be the dark mouth of a broad tunnel beyond her, she went rapidly on. "I've come here almost every year since I was about twelve. You see, what happened back then happened on September the fourteenth, my birthday. I've read all about the myth online, and it's only tonight when it works. While standing inside in a tiny dip in the ground, you have to look up and see the moon passing over that hole in the cave's ceiling. And when it's absolutely aligned, like a cap, the cave is sealed ... sealed by the moon. And that," she finished, with little uncertainty in her voice any more, "that is when you see *him*."

A god of desire, a master of rage, a spiritual advocate of every furtive taboo you or anyone else has ever considered ... Hell, had Lily been suggesting earlier that her father had once wanted to sexually abuse her? Or was she trying to tell Glenn, whom she surely trusted now, that the older man *had* gone that far? In reference to male behaviour, Lily had used the words "sad, common, and *dull* things"—and Glenn considered the implication here all too transparent.

But none of this squared with what he knew about his girlfriend's father. It was true that the other tall man was reserved, given to non-communication and periods of detachment. But *that* was the point: he seemed harmless, as if there was no hurt in him. He certainly hadn't seemed the type—and Glenn, in his professional role, had witnessed many of the kind—to commit domestic violence ... let alone anything even more sordid.

As Glenn wondered whether he was being naïve and still had much to learn, Lily went on.

"I grew bigger in my teens, but never big enough. I don't why you have to be so tall to see the moon cross the path of that hole on this particular night. The past is weird, full of stupid nonsense ... but in this case, the myth seemed to *work*. My dad went into the cave alone and observed the cave being sealed by the moon. And when he came back out, he was a *different man*. He never hit either of us again. It was as if ... as if ... oh, I don't know ..." Now her voice sounded desperate and frustrated, but eventually she added, "... as if he'd *seen* something in there that had changed everything."

At that moment, as Glenn continued processing left-field thoughts about an ancient god of the darker realms of human experience, Lily paced away from the snaking entrance to what was obviously Mooncap Cave and started goading him again.

"I want *you* to go inside," she said, her manipulative persona reappearing, teasing and taunting. With one hand, she pinched her small breasts and then placed the other in her groin, clutching and rubbing it. "I want to *know* what my dad saw that day fifteen years ago, Glenn. Only you are tall enough."

Two aspects of this latest information troubled him. The first was the age at which his girlfriend's dad had become less violent and possibly even more than that. Lily was now twenty-one, and fifteen years ago she'd have been just six. *Six*. If she'd experienced unnatural episodes at such an age, it was hardly surprising that she now behaved so provocatively, so moodily, so unpredictably.

But it was the other issue that unsettled Glenn the most. She'd said, "Only you are tall enough." And did that imply that she'd agreed to be his lover for only one reason—his height? This wasn't as comical as it sounded; Glenn had read many cases about relationships in which relative physical stature was a crucial component. Some women refused to date

short men, and this couldn't be ascribed to either social mores or evolutionary imperatives. It was a psychological preference, plunging deep into Freudian territory. Women with short fathers might be drawn to taller men as a way of defusing incestuous tensions, for instance. And those with tall fathers ...

Glenn refused to think about that. After all, his girlfriend had said nothing more about her dad than alluding to his violence before he'd entered the cave and his passivity after emerging. Maybe only that was involved, and Glenn was inventing the rest the way people in his profession often did, a clichéd occupational hazard, seeing smoke without fire.

Now Lily had placed one hand on his groin, which stirred with irrepressible need. "Go in there for me," she said in a low voice, like a coquettish temptress in full force. "And when you come back out, *tell me what you saw.*"

His penis stiffening under her imperious grasp—rational objectivity had little impact on the autonomous body; Glenn knew this from his studies, too—he pulled away slightly, but not so far that he was unable to relish these impromptu furtive developments. He imagined him and Lily walking back to the campsite later, after he'd got this foolishly symbolic act out of the way, and enjoying fiery sex in their tent. This was surely a watershed test, he thought, stepping away from his girlfriend and towards the shadowy mouth of the cave. By re-enacting a key episode from her disturbed youth, he could gain her trust and even help her become a normal person. That was what they wanted, after all: himself, Lily, her mother ... and even her culpable father. Normal. Prosaic. Like the humdrum world with all its delusional mythologies, its ancient, innocuous charms.

Without further hesitation, turning briefly to observe his giddy girlfriend with dope-narrowed eyes, Glenn stepped inside a tunnel darkened by the mysterious moon.

* * *

Fortunately, the tunnel, about twenty yards long and chinking from side to side, wasn't too cramped. Glenn suffered mildly from claustrophobia, a psychological condition that had a no more insidious cause than being a big guy in a world carpentered for smaller people. But *this* was no manmade

place, no tailored refuge from wild nature. This was the world itself, in all its cold, murky reality.

He strode across standing pools, residue from a recent downpour, before he and Lily had arrived at the campsite. Water also dripped from the top of the tunnel, more than once tapping him on his neck, like an insect falling to deliver its sting. But the sharp sensation was just coldness, sending shivers along his spine. He felt fearful, he could admit, but this was simply an atavistic response to his subterranean location and nothing to do with his girlfriend's words when she'd bullied him into coming down here.

He wondered again what this foolish game betokened. He was happy to do all he could to help her, especially after learning about such dark secrets from her past. But surely *this* went beyond the call of his occupational duties. Rounding a final bend in the dim, dank-smelling tunnel, he observed light up ahead, etching all the stone around him with crawling life. Then, entering a circular cave with a hole as big as his head in its ceiling, he realised where the illumination was coming from: the moon beyond that gap above, just visible from this angle.

Despite his mounting unease, Glenn tried telling himself that he'd consented to his girlfriend's eccentric request as a personal favour and not a professional obligation. He was here as her lover, and must now experience some nebulous part of her girlhood, when she'd been too young—only *six* years old—to remember anything accurately. The truth probably involved her father experiencing a paradigm shift in how he related to his family; maybe his wife had stood up to him, delivering an unambiguous ultimatum: *No more violence or we'll both leave, your daughter and I*. And the girl would have first noticed this while holidaying in the area, her childish mind, with all its innate capacity for animism, attributing the change to such a rich environment. Later, while researching the experience with credulous need, she'd learnt about the age-old myth associated with this small cave, the way the moon passed its hole, and the *thing* that allegedly dwelled here ... It was all nonsense, of course, as Glenn was about to prove.

Just then, noticing a slight dip at the heart of the shadow-filled cave and heading quickly towards it, he considered his own youth and all the commonplace events he might have similarly misinterpreted, imbuing them with magic and other primitive modes of thought. He'd been an anxious child, given to violent tantrums. But in hindsight, Glenn thought these had

been more to do with fear. He recalled being unable to sleep as a boy, even as late as his teenage years. That shadow beyond his bedroom curtains hadn't been a tree in his home's front garden, but a murderer come to bear him inexorably away. These episodes, which some might attribute to unaddressed psychological issues, but which Glenn ascribed to common vicissitudes of uncertain youth, had lasted until he was an adult and had taken charge of his life with a career, a home, and now a partner. Lately he found himself afraid of hardly anything ... until today, of course, standing in this spooky cave with only a perverted fairy story to make sense of it.

At that moment, from his new position, standing in a small dip that seemed designed for a human's bipedal posture, he spotted the moon gliding across the neat disc of the ceiling's hole. Only its right edge was presently visible, but Glenn was astonished how quickly it moved, as if accelerated by his queasy perception, which arose from either denied fear or the drug he'd imbibed earlier. But in truth, he knew this had to do with context, the stone framework reducing the satellite's cosmic capacity, turning it into a small cap over the cave. Now he realised why Lily had insisted that he observe this phenomenon: anyone shorter or even taller would struggle to see the moon describe this autumnal trajectory, moving over the gap so that its edges neatly aligned with those of the hole. He also understood why he'd had to stand in this dip in the cave's cold floor; it wasn't just about the angle at which he looked, but also his distance from the ceiling: his height and spatial location were perfectly combined to observe this ancient, mystical event.

And now it was about to happen.

As the bloated, bony moon nearly filled the hole in the ceiling, Glenn thought back to everything Lily had said, about how it had irrevocably changed her father, transforming him from a monster to some docile recluse. Assuming for a moment this had really happened, what impact might it have on Glenn, who was already quietly respectful? Would his reptilian self, the Freudian beast that allegedly existed inside all people, be roused from its depths? But that was stupid, *stupid*. Glenn glanced away from the moon now filling the hole in the cave's ceiling.

That was when he saw *it*.

Sitting against one wall directly ahead, the figure was as large as himself, but considerably fleshier, great folds hanging off a combination of

bones that seemed too slipshod to sustain any movement. It was as pale as the cosmic satellite Glenn had just been observing. Its face, insofar as this could be described, was a hybrid travesty of knotted skin and squashed features: eyes fought for supremacy amid a twisted nose and a razor-sharp mouth. Its ears were mere nubs, and what little hair existed on its flaky scalp looked like wire ripped from some faulty power socket. The whole of it appeared to thrum with incipient motion, even though it remained remarkably stationary; its elongated limbs, little more than sockets held together by stretches of sinew, hung laxly beside a corrugated torso, like wax dripping from a misshapen candle. It smelled like a zoo, foul and intense. Then it made a strange sound, like a trillion bees trapped in a locked room, and when it finally exhaled a bronchial breath, words soon followed, the aged utterances of something beyond such petty concerns as life and death.

If this was a human language, it was like none Glenn had ever heard. The syllables the thing spoke bounced around the cramped cave, as if they were beasts crashing against a cage's interior, powerfully seeking an exit. Glenn felt his psyche flinch from the sound and wondered whether his girlfriend outside might think a minor earthquake was occurring. But then he recalled how much she knew about this event; she'd been here before, after all, and would surely expect a violent trauma in this tiny, isolated part of the planet. Indeed, everything she'd told him was true: *a god of desire, a master of rage, a spiritual advocate of every furtive taboo you or anyone else has ever considered ...* This figure now sat in front of him, booming some message Glenn was unable to comprehend.

He flicked his glance from the creature, from its unreal face and stirring limbs. Then he found himself looking once more at the moon capping that hole in the cave's ceiling ... but now it had begun moving away, sliding further across the gap, its left edge parting from the makeshift lip. Seconds later, sensing a shriek of terror building inside him like the presence of something infinitely more dangerous than mere sound, he fled from the spot he'd occupied, in full view of that horribly bony entity, which had thundered out incomprehensible words, its flesh beginning to tremble and writhe.

While heading again for the exit—that damp, snaking tunnel—he thought he noticed in his peripheral vision the figure depart with the moon

that had brought it, but he lacked sufficient confidence to conduct a proper assessment. He simply wanted to get back outside, safe in the arms of Lily, someone who'd once experienced by proxy the horror he'd just endured. The creature's manifestation—its long-lasting effects—had altered her life forever, and this had surely been to the good.

As Glenn re-emerged from the underground layer and took hold of his waiting girlfriend, who simply smiled that knowing smile, he couldn't help wondering how it would all go for him.

* * *

"So come on, Glenn, tell me what you saw in there."

He'd already decided that he'd suffered some kind of pot-induced hallucination in the cave; that was a rational interpretation, the only explanation that made sense now that his emotional engagement in the event had diminished.

But Lily didn't want to hear such a humdrum account. Laid beside him in their tent, her eyes sparkled and her lips trembled. Her whole body, dressed only in knickers and a feminine vest, seemed to shake with imminent revelations.

When they'd arrived back in the campsite, it had been raining heavily, and this had provided Glenn with a perfect excuse not to stop and talk until he'd got his recollections into some kind of order. At the tent, he'd stooped and pushed aside all their goods inside—including that heavy mallet—before encouraging his girlfriend to enter, with him quickly bringing up the rear. Then, after stripping off their wet clothing, they'd sat and ate sandwiches until Lily, with scarcely suppressed eagerness, had refused to tolerate the silence by asking her plaintive question.

Glenn looked at her, still struggling to reconcile what he'd witnessed inside that cave with the uncomplicated way he'd always lived his life. He'd rarely done drugs, at least not hard ones, and the last time he'd suffered a bad dream was maybe five years ago, while studying for exams to qualify in his profession. But ... was there something *deeper* in his existence, something of which the *thing* he'd seen less than an hour earlier had been a subconscious symbol? Yes, this was surely now about *him*; the entity lurking in that shadowy place, a vision conjured from inaccessible

memories and sustained by perverse captivation, had tried telling him something, the way it had communicated a life-transforming message to his girlfriend's father, fifteen years ago. The creature was certainly delusional, but no less true in its meaning.

Lily was growing increasingly impatient. "Come on, *tell* me," she said, and immediately scabbled off the floor like an insect, swung one leg over his body, and then straddled him like a deadweight. She pressed her groin against his exposed boxer-shorts and lifted his hands to cup her pert breasts beneath her vest. Then, her voice no less insistent, she said slowly and surely, "*I ... want ... to ... know.*"

"What ... *what* do you want to know?" Glenn replied, becoming aroused despite the bullish way she always tried getting what she wanted from him.

"*Everything,*" she said, her tongue darting in her mouth like some forked appendage. "*Describe* it to me. Include *every* detail. Make me *feel* as if I was *there.*"

Perhaps he could do better than that; as his hands strayed higher up her body, sliding gently around her throat, he sensed a tormenting part of himself, one newly awakened by circumstance, wrestle to his surface, making his flesh burn with unrest. He recalled his cloistering mother and distant father, the psychopath who'd never actually stalked him in his childhood bedroom, and all the nightmares that had dogged him until later life ... And why did he now feel so *angry* about it? Whatever the truth was, he soon began to speak.

"I saw *it*, Lily. I saw *every* part of it. It was *hideous* and yet ... *strangely beautiful.*"

"*More,*" she said, pulling her arms away from his chest, snapping her hands behind her back, and then running fingers blindly down his pinned-down legs. "*More ... more ... more.*"

"Oh, the way it *smiled*—it looked like *you*, but far more insidious, as if it understood *everything* about the world and so many other terrible secrets."

"What? *What* does it understand?"

By this time, Glenn sensed himself improvising, abandoning all his usual neutral logic and professional distance. He felt one of his girlfriend's hands sliding between his thighs, grappling for the sensitive nest below her own pubic area. Maybe the other would soon follow. Then, deepening his vindictiveness, he said, "It knows all about *us*, Lily. It knows about bestial

people.” Now intuition took complete control of him, a combination of both his occupational experiences and every nebulous thing he’d ever suspected since childhood. “It understands that everything that happens to us has consequences and that no significant event can ever be overruled. It knows that functioning in everyday life involves suppression of desire, and that perversion is just blocked engagement. It realises that interaction with others is the most important aspect of our lives, and yet also the arena involving most risk. And *it* told me—yes, told *me*—that ... that ...” Just then, Glenn remembered that terrible noise in the cave, the sound of an earthquake taking grip, and that was when he finished, “... that buried secrets can be released.”

“At last it’s *free*,” said his girlfriend, having already tugged his erect penis from his shorts and shoved aside her knickers to enable rough entry. She’d done all this with one hand, and when Glenn jerked up, thrusting her backwards, he used both of his to search the area around them, the chilly groundsheet of the tent.

But it was too late.

She already had the weapon.

“And now *I* am, too,” she declared, raising the heavy mallet Glenn had used earlier to knock in those lethally sharp tent pegs, before bringing its head down firmly upon his face.

Broken Sleep

CODY GOODFELLOW

Cody Goodfellow's novels include Radiant Dawn and Ravenous Dusk (Perilous Press, 2000, 2003), Perfect Union (Swallowdown Press, 2010), and Repo Shark (Broken River Books, 2014). Both of his collections—Silent Weapons for Quiet Wars and All-Monster Action (Swallowdown Press, 2009, 2012)—received the Wonderland Book Award. His short fiction has appeared in Black Static, Inhuman, Cemetery Dance, and the Magazine of Bizarro Fiction. He recently edited Deepest, Darkest Eden (Miskatonic River Press, 2013), an anthology of new fantasies set in Clark Ashton Smith's Hyperborea, and is currently assembling a companion volume of Zothique stories.

THE LAST PLACE TRE WAS LOCKED UP, THEY WOULD line up all the new inmates, naked and shivering and dripping chemical disinfectant. The commandant tells you that the first rule is no talking, *ever*. *Any questions?* he asks. The next new fish who opens his hole gets his teeth smashed in with a truncheon. *Any more questions?*

Tre was swiftly learning to miss that kind of caring human contact.

This new place seemed better at first. He didn't even remember being transferred in. He just woke up in this plastic coffin, a solitary cell like a port-o-shitter turned on its side. By his second sleep cycle, he forgot why he was arrested. By the third one, he had to search for the barcode on his wristband to recall his name.

Pills ground up in his food, gritty Mexican pharmaceuticals in tropical beach party colors. He tripped often enough to know the taste of alkaloids, but this shit was way too strong. Meals came with more pills in a tiny envelope that told him to report any SIDE EFFECTS.

It was better than any high he ever paid for, most of the time. He'd think of something funny and forget to laugh, or just mumble the word *joke* over and over, cackling like a loon. But there were moments when he dreamt he was flying, and then he was falling and jolted out of sleep with his heart racing and every muscle tied in knots, every time he started to really *sleep*.

They shocked him awake with microscopic electrodes embedded under his skin, and if he didn't forget what he was doing and fall asleep again right away, he would scalp himself with his bare hands, trying to dig them out.

All his life, Tre barely remembered his dreams. Something was chasing him, or he was chasing something. It almost had him or he almost had it, and then he woke up. But now he was aware he was dreaming, aware that he was asleep—if he was *anywhere*, it had to be a dream—but he couldn't remember being awake. They drugged him out of his mind and shocked him out of sleep, channel-surfing him with their remote control. He had to go somewhere....

They're trying to drive you crazy, said the smartest part of him, the part that he beat down inside himself, whenever it dared to speak up. *They're*

trying to drive you out of your mind so they can follow you like a marked rat, so they can track you back to the nest.

It got worse when they stopped feeding him.

The dreams got uglier. Chasing him and pushing him into a pit and he was drowning in battery acid. He pinched himself to wake up, but it didn't work. He bit himself, tearing skin and God he was delicious. He ate half of his own hand and was gnawing on his wrist when he woke up and saw his cell was open.

A big black thing waited in the corridor, crouching between him and his food. It lifted a leg and pissed on the tray, but it was nothing like a dog.

He pinched himself. It didn't hurt like hunger, but it felt real enough. Without another thought, he lunged at the thing, drove it back on its hind legs, slammed it into the wall, and ripped out its throat in his teeth.

He ate everything, even the bones. He grew so full that he expanded right through tinfoil and cardboard walls.

It was another dream, but more real than anything he'd ever experienced, awake or asleep or on any drug. The light was like wine, the air was alive with music and perfume, and the wind felt like the skin of a woman against him.

He floated among thousands, millions of human bodies, mostly naked or in varying states of undress, in a bottomless sky of glowing clouds and gentle, embryonic warmth. He was the only one awake, the only one who was real.

A beautiful redheaded woman floated by and he tried to grope her, but she popped like a soap bubble. Others crumbled like ash or dissipated like smoke. He raged at them, tumbling through clouds of bodies like a bullet until he encountered one that hit him back.

Her hair was blacker than shadows, and it covered her milk-white face like a living veil, but flashes of green submarine light spilled out of her eyes. She asked his name.

He hesitated, wracking his brain. He wasn't wearing a wristband or anything else, and neither was she. "Andre K— Tre, just Tre. Who're you? How come you're not like everybody else?"

"My name's Ariadne here," she said. "And we're inside the Orgasm." Drifting from one body to the next, she sought out a woman wrapped in a dove-gray fur coat and turned her over to go through her pockets. Some of

them were entangled in the heat of sex, but most were alone with their eyes rolled back in their heads. “You know what this is, right? How old are you?”

His mind was a sieve. His body changed or dissolved when he tried to look at it. He guessed, “Sixteen ...”

“Maybe in a couple years, player.” Jumping into a tangle of young faceless men in fraternity sweaters, she took wallets and drug stashes and tiny gray firefly things out of their heads. “You’re lucky. Most inmates in the solitary program break down and lose it without ever finding their way out of their own heads. Some inmates will maim themselves or go crazy to get out of work detail, you know? *Knocking on Joe*, they used to call it. But the *really* crazy ones are the ones who do the real shit work in here. If you lose your name, you forget who and what you are. They use you completely. That black dog-thing on your breath ... that’s what you turn into.”

Nausea made him start to feel solid, start to fall. “Whatever,” he said. Already bored. “This is a dream, right? We should do it.”

She shook her head, so tired, though he still couldn’t see her face. “Thanks, no. You look like a Francis Bacon painting of someone he *really* hated.”

“But this is my dream, and you—”

“This isn’t *your* dream. Right now, we’re in an artificial communal dream-space created with drugs and guided hypnotic imagery. Everyone sleeping in its broadcasting footprint experiences the same wet dream, brought to you by Burroughs-Wellcome, Bechtel and Wackenhut.”

The velvet ease of her dismissal sent him into a childish fury. Thrashing another knot of orgasmic ghosts into sparkling ashes, he turned on her with azure fire drooling out of his fists. “I’m old enough, and I’m more real than you can handle, girl.”

She turned away, daring him to come at her. Floated above him and her hair fanned out, giving him a glimpse of her face. Light came out of her mouth. She had no eyes, only holes alive with television snow.

“Listen, dummy. The people who run the prison are using you as guinea pigs. They’re keeping you in a lucid dream state ... jolting you with electrical shocks until you’re dreaming while you’re awake.... That’s just

the primary conditioning. They're trying to find and control dreamers who can go into other people's dreams."

He still didn't understand why she didn't want to hook up, but she must be *someone else*, not a figment of his exhausted imagination. "Why are they doing this to us?"

"Why? To sell things. To run everybody. They want to create a universal dream-space that they can control ... or to discover the real one, so they can plant a flag in it."

She kissed him, and the shock was greater than the electrode jolts. Her words were too heavy to hear; they sank into him like lead.

Something blocked out the sun. The air turned cold and slimy and too thick to breathe. Any second they were going to shock him awake and he wanted to hold onto her, but the thing was so huge it exerted its own gravity. It sucked him down, away from her, and all the empty vessels fell after him like rain.

"Run!" she cried. "Run back to your body! Choose the right door—"

He fought to stay with her, climbing and leaping over tumbling bodies, screaming her name, but she floated always out of reach. He hit the bottom and the bodies kept piling up. Thrashing, clawing, biting, tearing, and crawling, but they buried him alive. Crushed under their weight and stink and waste, unable to breathe, unable to die. When the lightning in his head finally jerked him out of the dream, he awoke clawing at the walls.

* * *

At the first place they locked him up, when he was eleven, you could go to the yard after lunch, where it was too hot for anything but fighting, or you could go to the library. There were no good books to read, but if you wanted to stay, you had to do puzzles. The pictures on the boxes were sun-bleached or mismatched or just missing. Many puzzles were just in coffee cans, with no hint of what they should look like. You had to move the pieces around and try to put them together, knowing none of the pieces might even be from the same puzzle.

He had gotten quite good at puzzles, at spotting things that did or didn't belong, at making things that didn't belong fit together. It helped him to cope now, when every morning he woke up in a different prison.

The rules were always different, but always the same. It was a dream-prison, a shared imaginary space. The other people around him were not figments of his imagination, but other drugged prisoners. Sometimes they were giant, toddling, bawling babies. Other times they were skeletons riddled with ghostly parasites the size of pythons. In the worst of them, there was only blackness, sickness, and tubes going in and out of his arms and down his throat, and choking himself to death the only exit.

Tre figured out the rules soon enough. When a boy with a huge black-red starfish for a face jumped him in the shower, Tre cut him from nipples to navel with a knife that came out of his mouth. The wound yawned and everything but blood poured out. Before the guards gassed them, he tore the hole in the inmate wider and climbed into it and escaped.

He wandered in and out of strangers' fantasies like a runaway bogeyman, crashing forbidden love trysts and eternal birthday parties and shredding gossamer ectoplasm in his dreamteeth, always looking for another door. When the familiar CLICK CLICK of alien voltage shot through his brain, he welcomed it and rode the lightning down into deeper sleep.

* * *

It looked like an ancient, ruined amusement park—Six Flags over Atlantis—drooping arches and crooked towers infested with rusting, hyperbolic ribbons of rollercoaster track, endless empty arcades, deserted shopping malls and echo-haunted pavilions the color and texture of fossilized bones. The pavement was slick, grimy ice; beneath it, he could see a black, rushing river. Drowning people and things both foreign and familiar pounded at the ice and screamed bubbles at him until the current ripped them away.

Mobs of undead scavengers with featureless green hamburger faces climbed out of the gutters. He ran like a drunken puppet as the street turned to taffy. "Get back, you bastards!" he roared. "I'm the last man!"

He dashed their hollow heads open, and pumpkin seeds and circuitry spilled out. They forgot him, swinging listlessly at each other and gasping, *I'M the last man!* And maybe each of them was right, he thought, when he looked into a funhouse mirror and saw his own rotten, bloated face.

A paralyzing shock jerked him by the silver cord that bound his soul to his body, growing to a grand mal seizure when he fought it. Sweltering fever-heat poured out of him. The ice melted and cracked. He plunged into frigid blackness and was swept away.

The next dream was beautiful: endless blood-red jungle, rolling valleys, eternal tribal war. Tiny, twig-boned jungle pygmies prowled the crushed velvet undergrowth, blasted or blessed with strange mutations that made each tribe a species unto itself. He waded into internecine feuds and picked a side at random and stomped the enemy like ants, and they carried him to their village like a living god of war. They offered him what little food they had, sang his praises as they starved, as their fragile fairy daughters withered, blackened, and burst at his touch.

He stayed through three seasons and burned through ninety-two tribes like a plague and it was hard to leave, but he could find no peace. She haunted his dreams within dreams. *This is a labyrinth, not a maze*, she told him. *There are no dead ends, no alternate exits. The only way out is through* ...

She was the only real thing, the only one who could remind him this was a dream. The mere thought of her brought the shocks, as if to punish him or deliver him deeper, but they could barely reach him, here. He was almost happy ...

And then the real gods came, and he was only another scurrying insect looking for a rock to hide under.

They ate up the sky with their obscene, insane parade of shapes, but there were no shadows when they held up lenses that magnified the blood-red sun into slashing white tongues of fire.

Burning down to his bones, he ran for hours through the inferno, and it hurt more than anything he'd ever felt in waking life, but he couldn't wake up, he couldn't even die.

He came to a ruined temple adorned with sleeping stone faces and bug-eyed, bloody-tusked angels. Before the temple lay a long, narrow pool that perfectly reflected the tower, but the sky in the reflection was a star-mad winter night with a bloated blue full moon impaled upon the tower's silver spire.

Tre threw himself into the water, but when he broke the surface he only fell faster into the airless void on the other side of the mirror. Screaming

only sucked cold fire into his lungs as he plummeted past the darkly luminous faces of the mirror-temple and fell burning into the starry dark of deepest dreams.

Swimming through eternal night, the stars grew larger, more numerous ... swelled until they surrounded him and swallowed the darkness. He hid his face from their unblinking glare, flinched from the snail-trail touch of naked eyeballs on his goosebump-prickled flesh. In the place where everything was made of eyes, he finally found her.

Her matted hair was made of rusty knives. “Jung said dreams are the ‘voice of Nature,’ but She stopped talking to us a long time ago. Did you ever read old books and wonder what they were all smoking? Their dreams were so much deeper, more real. Even *you* can tell that our dreams are broken.”

“I don’t need you—” His words came out as stillborn bubbles, turning belly-up and floating away. When they finally reached his ears, he heard himself say, *I don’t know how to read.*

With a sad, rusty nod, she said, “You can’t just wake up, because you’re not in your own dream. These are the gutters of the collective unconscious, which they’re trying to colonize, because something went wrong with the real lands of Dream.”

He tried to speak again and almost drowned. Her silencing finger was like a sword on his lips.

“When the first proto-humans started to achieve true consciousness, the disconnected hemispheres of the brain started talking to each other, and we met gods in our dreams. They taught us hunting and farming and art and war. They raised us up, but we came to believe it was just us, talking to ourselves in the dark.

“Somewhere around the middle of the last century, the human race had kind of a collective nervous breakdown. We were kicked out of our dreams, the real ones, the shared space where we once touched the infinite. Long before either of us was born, we lost the Realms of Deeper Sleep ... the door closed, the temple fires were put out, and now something blocks the way. That’s what you’re trying to find. Somewhere deep inside us is the door to the dream more real than waking life, the dream of the universe itself.”

He struggled to make himself heard, to make his words into sound. “I don’t want to know this—”

“You *already* know it. They have their pet theories, but they can’t face the truth. *They’re* the ones who cut us off from the Dream. Movies and TV and everything we consume, all that energy wasted to make all those false realities more real than our own. They’ve already made waking life a dream and the dreamers into a mushy mass-mind where everyone shares the same dream of being the only one who matters.

“That’s why, whenever they catch someone who grew up without media saturation—Islamic terrorists, home-schooled fringers, feral kids, or chronic wards of the state like yourself—they wreck their sleep schedule and test them to destruction trying to find out how to repair what’s gone wrong with the rest of us.”

His frustration swelled into a bubble that enclosed them both. Eyes oozed all around them, bathing them in vacant scrutiny. “Who are you, really? Where are you? You’re not in jail. You don’t have a dog in this fight. I just want to go home. I want to wake up ...”

She shook her head and shed sparks. The knives sang like wind chimes. Burning wind threw him down so he found himself staring up into her eyeless face. “Forget about waking up. *They* can’t even wake you up now. The lucid dreaming program runs in ninety-day cycles. If you’re this deep, you’re probably a brain in a bucket with some jumper cables on it by now. They use any excuse to cut you open, sell your organs. The Dream is the only real afterlife, the only real state where human minds have survived the death of their bodies. You have to go through to the other side. Find the one who stands between humanity and the Gate of Deeper Slumber. Find it and kill it.”

“Why should I?”

She tilted her head and now she had eyes like opals, and a smile like molten diamonds. “I belong to the man who can lead us to the true Dream.”

He inhaled the bubble, pulling her toward him. “I’ll put your ass to sleep, don’t worry. But what’s in it for me?”

Her sly diamond smile turned to coal. “Everything mortal will fail you.”

“I won’t fail you.” He breathed in the blood and wine heat of her, and became a man.

“You will,” she said. “And *I’m* not mortal.”

She kissed him. A spark passed from her lips and bored into his brain, burning synapses to slag, creating strange new paths and echoing voices in his mind. His head exploded and he woke up.

He floated above a desolate wasteland of ashen dunes. Glowering over the horizon, a sickly white mountain with a huge, hideous monument carved into it. Eroded limestone features slowly emerged from the gray void, until he realized that the face of the mountain was his own.

Tubes ran up his nose and down his throat, and an IV dripped glucose into his arm. Nobody had ever put so much effort into keeping him alive. His body jerked as regulated high-voltage pulses raced through it. A rubber plug in his mouth kept him from biting through his tongue.

From somewhere out in the murky void beyond the bed, a ghastly panorama of distorted faces leered down, dire constellations that blurred and warped and spun off flaming comets of words that tumbled to detonate upon the twisted wreckage of Andre Kellogg's body.

"Mr. Kellogg ... Is he, can he ... He is? OK.... Tre, your mother says you like to be called *Tre*.... You're in a secure ward at MU Hospital. You've been an inmate at a private juvenile correctional institution, and you've been under sedation for most of the last fourteen months.... We're very sorry for your discomfort, but the parent company was in no way legally responsible for what happened. This affidavit releases us of liability...."

Big pregnant pause, filled with the sound of breathing machines.

"Now, all the records were destroyed.... What we're trying to ascertain is the objective of the experiment that was performed on you.... Anything you could volunteer would be invaluable.... Can he even hear me?"

He tried, but could not get any closer to his body. A soft but irresistible wind, the repulsion of like magnetic charges, pushed him back. He could only watch as his hand reached out for the pen and mechanically signed the form.

He drifted off and they left his body alone and when he woke up, he was still months of agony away from walking without assistance, but he would survive ... and more, he would get something he never could have hoped for—a second chance. He could recover and start over with a clean slate and the knowledge that the broken, insane system had failed to swallow him whole—

He woke up on another table—a cold steel one, and the lights in his face hid the masked canine faces of the ghouls who cut him open and played inside him.

“Jesus, look at these lungs. What are these kids smoking these days?”

“Dibs on the liver ...”

He turned away and flew, burning through the restraints and the red curtains of the operating theater, and then he was racing through the trees of a forest. He ran like a flayed rabbit, hunched over to hold his slit belly together. The surgeons chased him through the misty forest on all fours, baying his secret name. He threw scraps of himself over his shoulder and escaped when they stopped to eat them. Through the mist and great cathedral groves, he stalked until he came to the edge of a chain of purple, snow-crowned mountains.

A vast ruined city of giants melted into inky pools and indigo rivers of shadow in the faltering glow of a bloated purple sun. The road passed among towering mausoleums and orgies of shattered statuary. He heard a brittle clap of falling brickwork and whirled in time to see her vanish behind a rock.

“I see you!” he shouted, then turned his back. He needed nothing from her now.

“You shouldn’t have come here!” she cried out. “You’ll just deliver it to them—”

He threw a rock at her, but it seemed to pass right through her, confirming his fear. “Get lost, you’re not real! You took over my body and sold me out—”

“You’re still confused, poor dear. Are you really so sure that *you’re* real?”

He threw another rock, but it turned to smoke as it left his hand. The street subsided beneath him, like a great beast letting out a long, last breath.

A pulsating flood of pus boiled up out of the earth, the distilled infection of a mortal wound. Before Tre could make her understand, the sea of sickness had drawn itself up into a suppurating tidal wave.

Domed temples collapsed under its lurching, liquid weight. It stretched upwards and curled overhead, countless human bodies suspended within its gelatinous mass.

“Kill it!” she screamed. “That’s the thing that stands in the way of the Dream! You can be the one who saved the sanity of the whole human race, Tre! You can be the one to slay the dragon—”

It didn’t look like a dragon. A wall of liquid flesh crashed down on the causeway, flinging bricks larger than cars aside like grains of sand.

He ran so fast he flew over the buckling plaza, dodging falling columns until he came to the end of the abandoned city. The road led to the head of a staircase that wound down the sheer mountain face into shoals of dimly glowing clouds far, far below.

She stood behind him. She looked younger than he was, but he knew better than to trust anything he saw. “It’ll crush you if you take another step. It’ll eat you up so you die inside it forever.”

—*Fight that, I can’t*—

At his back now, she pushed him toward it. “You only have to face it to drive it back. Then we’ll escape—together ...”

He didn’t know what to believe. He embraced her, pivoted, and threw her over his shoulder into the gathering protoplasmic storm. The monstrosity recoiled, shivering with joy as it digested her. Seemingly forgotten, he escaped, sobbing with terror and relief.

The treads of the staircase were too tall to scale alone, but he lowered himself over each of seventy cliff-like risers and dropped from the last step just as the terminal rays of daylight failed. Somewhere along the way, the stairs had grown smaller, or he had grown larger, until he stumbled over them and had to stoop to proceed down the tunnel at the foot of the stairs. Satisfied with his offering, the abomination did not follow.

The tunnel abruptly grew into a grotto lit by a pillar of white fire. The walls were riddled with holes, doors, and gates. Some were rusted shut or blocked by sheets of cobweb or clumps of fungi, while others were lit by torches and hung with faded billboards and flashing video screens.

He did not mean to bow to the two ancient men who stood between him and the maze of doorways. They stood taller than the tallest he could make himself, and wore monk’s robes and peaked hats with feathers as high as their gray beards were long.

Something about them reminded him of ancient Egypt: the sandstone skin, the hieroglyphic nonsense that came from their hidden lips; but they

were older than Egypt, older than mankind. Yet he did not look away, for he recognized the craggy, merciless cast of their faces. They were judges.

One of them took his shoulder and pressed him down into his true shape. *You must present your ka, my son, to enter.*

He didn't understand, but this was no time to show weakness. "You can't stop me. I faced the thing outside, and I beat it. I've come to open the gate of dreams ..." *In the name of the gods Burroughs-Wellcome, Bechtel and Wackenhut ...* "I claim the right to pass for all humankind ..."

The judges looked at one another. Nasht, the one who touched him, carved a question in the air, and his brother, Kaman-Thah, answered with a shattering laugh.

The thing you defeated is the diseased dreaming of all your brothers and sisters. You saw it as it saw itself, for that is its sickness. Each of you hates the whole as it hates itself, and so you can never be free of each other, and so you can never be one. Separated from your souls, you can only be reunited in dreams. So they may never pass into the land of deeper sleep, as you may still ... but where is your ka?

"My what?"

The judge held up a mirror. In its murky depths Tre saw, for just a moment, Ariadne reaching out to him as she fell into the countless mouths of the thing that chased them, but then he only saw himself, gasping like a beached fish.

Your soul, boy ... what have you done with your soul?

He tore free of them and raced toward the wall of doors. They moved after him so fast their human masks slipped, and for just a moment he glimpsed their true faces. But they couldn't stop him, because he knew what he was looking for.

She showed him. He thought she had betrayed him, but she had showed him what none of the others had discovered, the true nature of the only door that opened. At last, he would do something that mattered. He would set himself free, and the whole human race—

With his eyes wide open and his hands steeped in a diver's prayer, he leapt into the pillar of living flame.

The fire was blinding and all-consuming.

Beyond it lay a place made of joy. He had dreamt of it before, but now that he had truly reached it, he found a purity that rendered reality a pallid,

dirty shadow. The light resolved and softened, and he saw the lands of Dream—

And then he was dragged backward through the fire.

Only by slow, agonizing degrees did he come to realize that he was under restraints in bed and being jolted by temporal electrical shocks. Awake.

“Hey, the shitbird’s still alive. What’d I tell you?”

“I didn’t bet you.”

“Whatever. Hey, kid—which one of these tubes is he breathing through? Hey, kid, you want to talk now?”

He looked right through them. This was just another bad dream. He would wake up any moment, in the Dream that was more real than waking.

“Drop the act, kid. You’ve only been in solitary for forty-eight hours. The sooner you tell us what they said, the sooner you can go back.”

This wasn’t a dream. With cold surgical tools, they pinched about ten places on his body that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was awake, that had him begging to tell them everything.

But the words wouldn’t come.

So that night, they started all over again.

A Prism of Darkness

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

Darrell Schweitzer is the author of The Shattered Goddess (Donning/Starblaze, 1983), The White Isle (Borgo Press, 1989), The Mask of the Sorcerer (NEL, 1995), Living with the Dead (PS Publishing, 2008), and others. His more than 300 short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. He has published books about H. P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany, and much other literary nonfiction. He is a four-time World Fantasy Award nominee and one-time winner and was for nineteen years coeditor of Weird Tales. His collected Lovecraftian tales appeared as Awaiting Strange Gods (Fedogan & Bremer, 2015).

THE LAST NIGHT ON EARTH OF DR. JOHN DEE, Mortlake, England, March 1609:

He knew what was coming for him on the stairs. What he found fearsome about the dark was not the unknown terrors it might hold, or the fathomless abyss which he had come to contemplate more and more in these past weeks and months, but that he knew precisely what was there.

He heard the footsteps.

The room filled with a black mist. The candle on the desk where he worked assumed a strange halo.

Still, as if this were no more than an ordinary visitation, he puzzled over a difficult passage in the Greek text he was translating, and jotted down some notes without looking up until he was done.

Before him, like a paper lantern floating in swirling black smoke, hovered a yellow mask, strangely fashioned, the shape behind it not quite possessing the familiar contours of humanity.

The eyes opened, and they were very dark, but somehow intense at the same time, like obsidian fire.

Remembering a play he had once seen, back when he'd had time for such things, he spoke aloud, "*Ah, Mephistophilis ...*"

The other quoted back at him, "*Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven.*"

Dee laughed. "I hardly think so. I hardly think you have come to offer me that, my old friend."

"Am I your friend," said the other, "or your patron?"

He looked at the growing piles of pages before him, the fragile, half-charred copy of the Greek text, and the newly scribbled, growing pile of the English version he had worked so long to render. Yes, this other had commissioned it of him, when all his human colleagues turned away from him and laughed, or just forgot about him, as the king and the emperor had forgotten about him in his old age and poverty.

Only his a new patron cared.

Or his master.

He looked at the pages. Even as he sat there, his palsied hands trembling, his fingers barely able to hold his pen, the pages seemed to increase in

number *all by themselves*, covered with his own handwriting or something like it, as if the dark and forbidden work on which he had embarked now had continued from its own inertia, as if the book were *translating itself*, without any further effort on his part.

What was the purpose of the translation anyway? He could only wonder. Surely learned men could already read the Greek, or, easier still, a Latin version that was purported to exist, and this was hardly the sort of thing to be popular with the half-literate, rowdy crowds that finger-stained their way through broadsides and quarto copies of frivolous plays.

Surely the only purpose for such a translation was so that the content of the book, the thoughts and vistas and terrors that it contained, could be filtered through a single mind, even a mind as drifting, as failing as his own. If that was what was really going on. If the book really was, now, *translating itself*. He was no more than a focal instrument now, like a prism through which light passes. Or in this case, darkness.

“A prism of darkness,” he said aloud.

Indeed, the darkness seemed to close around him. The candle’s light lost its color, until it was almost gray.

The mask floated before him, and before him too, as if revealed from out of the folds of some infinitely dark, indistinguishable cloak, was a single pale hand, not quite skeletal, but thin, delicate, and somehow shifting before his uncertain eyesight like mercury made flesh.

“Are you ready to go with me then?” said the other.

“I am. I would see these wonders about which I have thus far only read.”

He reached out to take the hand that reached for his. He slid down from his high stool, but his legs buckled under him, and he stumbled, and fell, and hit his head on something.

* * *

“Father!” someone cried. “Father! Oh, help him up!”

Strong hands took hold of him. He reached up to where his head hurt. A more gentle hand pulled his own away.

“I think it’s only a bruise.”

“Shall we send for a doctor of physic?”

“Sister, I am a doctor of physic.”

They were helping him to his feet, and the deeper of the two voices said, "Can you stand, sir?"

"Will he be well?"

"I think we should get some wine in him. Then put him to bed."

"He's worked so hard at his labors."

"He needs rest."

Now they were gently easing him down the stairs. They sat him in a large, comfortable chair before a table. There was a cup pressed into his hands.

For a time it seemed that the voices around him were that almost bird-like babble-babble of the Enochian tongue, the language of the hosts of angels, which he had once tried so hard to learn. But no, they were only speaking English, and he knew them.

He opened his eyes fully and saw that he was seated before the table in his own dining room, on the first floor of the house. There was no swirling black mist. The candles had no strange halo, nor had the color been leached out of their light. A fire burned merrily in the fireplace.

"Father, look," said his daughter, Katherine, who cared for him in these last years, "it's Arthur, come to visit."

"Back from school?"

"No, Father. From court. I spoke to the king some days ago."

"Ah yes, God save His Majesty ..."

"Here, drink this." Someone pressed the wine cup to his lips. He drank, and it did seem to relax him. Once brother Arthur and Katherine were convinced that he had not injured himself in his fall, that he was as sound as he might be at such an age, they all sat together. An hour or so passed. They dined. He ate little. Arthur, who was a grown man now, not the boy who had gone away to school, chattered on about his attempts to find royal favor, and how, if he did, the king might send him to Russia in a few years.

"I'm not sure when I'll be back. It might be a while."

He understood what that meant—that he would never see his eldest son again. But then, he would never see his first wife again, whom he could hardly remember, because she was dead, or his second wife, Jane, who was dead, or several of his children, who were dead, so it made very little difference to add one more to that list, and after tonight, he knew, nothing much mattered. He wouldn't be seeing Katherine again either. Something

about ever-moving spheres of Heaven, and voices that were not the voices of angels.

“This has been a very pleasant dream, and I am grateful for it,” he said, as he got up from the table.

* * *

Suddenly the room was dark again, and he felt that darkness somehow draw away from him, as if from a small room in a wood and plaster house he had now stepped into a vast cavern without seeing that he did so.

Then the lights came up and he was in a place he knew, in the palace at Whitehall, and Her Majesty the Queen (whom he knew to be dead) sat before him in all her glory, and she said to him, “Doctor Dee, will you scrye for me?”

Indeed, all his instruments had been placed on a table before the throne, and there was a chair provided, and he sat, and he began to work his art, peering into his black Aztec mirror until he saw there the faces of his dead wives and children, and he saw many others he had known, who were dead, including that rogue and scoundrel, Edward Kelley, who had so cruelly used him and robbed him of gold, honor, reputation, and even for a time his Jane’s favors ... but that was all fading now, and he spoke to the queen of what he saw with the aid of his magic stones and mirror and crystal ball ... and it must not have pleased her when he described monsters lying deep within the earth, made of the very stone, yet still alive and dreaming. He told, too, of black worlds rolling in the infinite darkness inhabited by winged demons made of living fungus (but no angels), and of depths deeper still, wherein lurk such powers as have no concern for mankind or mankind’s doings or mankind’s imaginings.

“And what of God, then?” demanded the queen.

“I do not see him here, Majesty. With regret ...”

There was a sharp tone in her voice, a rising displeasure, and he imagined that she frowned, but he could not see it because her face was like the mask of a porcelain doll. He knew she painted makeup onto makeup as she assumed her seemingly timeless, regal state, and wore at least an inch of it, so that indeed the pale mask through which her angry eyes blazed seemed to float in a room otherwise filled with black, swirling mist.

In time he rose, and bowed as gracefully as the infirmities of his age allowed, and, without permission, he left the queen's presence, saying only, "This has been a pleasant dream and I am grateful for it."

He only dared do that because as he turned from her he took the hand of the figure in the yellow mask, which led him into the darkness once more. Slowly, painfully, he climbed a cramped, twisting stair and found himself again in his own study, in the upper story of his house, where the candles had burned low and the light had lost all color, fading into a dull gray, like the color of a foggy evening, as the night closed in.

He saw that the stack of Englished pages was substantially higher than it had been, and he watched the delicate pages of the Greek text of the *Necronomicon* turn themselves slowly. It seemed that in some remote dream, or other existence, he still sat at that desk and did the work, but his eyes only beheld the pages increasing themselves, and the Greek text turning, and the handwriting appearing on pages of blank paper, like some secret message in invisible ink, revealed by the heat of candle-flame (however colorless).

Said the other, quoting the old play again, "*That time may cease, and midnight never come.*"

"But midnight has already come, and is past," said John Dee.

"Are you afraid?"

Dee looked around the room one last time, noting what remained of his beloved accumulation of books, and his instruments, after pillage and poverty had thinned the collection considerably.

"My life has been a pleasant dream, and I am grateful for it."

"Then come."

The last thing he saw was that the stack of translated pages had ceased growing. The Greek text had closed itself. The work was done. It would go on now, of its own volition, through the years, finding its own readership, transforming (or corrupting) souls.

Somehow he had the memory of *having done* although not of *doing*, as if some other self, in another dream had wrought and labored, and read the matter that was accumulated there, writing all this into his own memory like a postscript.

He stepped forward, hand in hand with the one in the yellow mask, the one whose name and legend he knew, that Crawling Chaos which came

down from the stars in ancient times and took the form of a man, and moved among men in secret, to subvert and to mock.

All this streamed and focused through his mind, like light through a prism, though it was more an *anti-light*, not any mere absence of light, but something more active than mere darkness. In this darkness then, he tumbled, as the other held him firmly by the hand. He fell among the stars of heaven, splashing among them as among glowing foam. Then there was more darkness again, and he saw shapes rising up around him, and he beheld their faces, serene and primal and utterly indifferent to him and his life and to his queen and his country and to all the strivings of mankind; beings which were both alive and dead, to whom humanity was not even a comedy to be laughed at, but *nothing* at all, and he knew the truth of what the book told him, that *these* were the masters of the earth and of the heavens, not Jehovah, not Jesus, not angels, that there wasn't even a Satan in that dark abyss to work his damnation.

He thought one last time of that old play, and how the sorcerer screamed "Ugly Hell, gape not!" and prayed that his soul be changed into droplets of water and hidden in the ocean; but here, in the sequel, after he had been carried off, there was no Inferno to torment him. No devils waiting. Yes, he saw the fires that burned at the core of creation. Yes, he saw how the earth and the moon and the sun were all but infinitesimal specks in the chaos of the universe. He saw how spheres undreamed of by philosophers turned in spaces no words or mathematics could describe, and how when those spheres were aligned just so, the Great Ones would one day return and the earth, its trivialities, empires and kingdoms, lords and philosophers, learned treatises and absurd plays by some drunk who got killed in a brawl, theology, geography, mathematics, poetry, would all be reduced to the same measureless, unaccountable dust.

And in the end, after he had sojourned for a time upon some black planet beyond the reach of light and there absorbed vast wisdom from the whispers of beings that were like living stones, whose voices were like slow winds whispering over mountaintops, the one in the yellow mask, whose name, among others, was *Nyarlatheotep*, came to him at last and bade him take the final step, to complete their journey to the dark chamber in the center of the universe where Azathoth howls blindly.

So they traveled, descending through a tunnel made of swirling worlds and stars and dust, and they heard the demon drumming, and the pipers, and the howling, and before the sound became deafening, the other spoke to him again.

“Have you any regrets?”

“All these dreams have been a pleasing diversion. I do not regret them.”

And they two bowed down before the dark throne and made their obeisance.

And even after that there was a kind of survival, a kind of duration, and he understood that the ultimate message of the *Necronomicon* had traveled through the prism of his own mind, through space to the end of space, and through time to the end of time, and now he could discern it at least dimly, in the very fabric of the cosmos (if that too were not also a dream).

And to his companion he said, “Everything to this point has been a lie, but I would have the truth.”

“The truth?”

“Yes, that.”

And before even those quicksilver hand could respond to stop him, he reached out and snatched away the yellow mask.

He felt an intense cold. Perhaps he heard a scream, or a whisper in the language of angels.

Perhaps he knew everything now. Perhaps he knew nothing. Perhaps there was nothing *to* know.

Night of the Piper

ANN K. SCHWADER

Ann K. Schwader's fiction and poetry have recently appeared in Dark Fusions (PS Publishing, 2013), Deepest, Darkest Eden (Miskatonic River Press, 2013), The Book of Cthulhu II (Night Shade Books, 2012), Fungi (Innsmouth Free Press, 2012), A Season in Carcosa (Miskatonic River Press, 2012), The Book of Cthulhu (Night Shade Books, 2011), Twisted in Dream (Hippocampus Press 2011), and elsewhere. She is a 2010 Bram Stoker Award finalist. Her Lovecraftian tales have been gathered in Dark Equinox and Other Tales of Lovecraftian Horror (Hippocampus Press, 2015).

THE NIGHT WAS THE SNOW WAS THE WIND, AND ALL of it howled. Barefoot and shivering, she stood alone under a broken moon whose face was not the clean silver she remembered, but a festering wound. Only desolation met her gaze: no huddled cattle here. No snow fences or barbed wire.

Only the wind's madness, and something worse twisting through it.

At first, it resembled the wail of an ancient flute ... but voiced by nothing human. Nothing her mind could bear. Clutching both arms tightly about herself, she dug her teeth into her lip as a shadow coalesced from the night and the snow. It was a malformed thing, skinny and hunchbacked, and it capered as it played upon its instrument.

More shadows appeared in the distance. Slinking along the ground, whimpering and fawning, they crept toward the piper—and her—with gathering fire in their yellow eyes—

Whuff!

A gust of Rottweiler breath tore Cassie Barrett out of the dream. Gasping, she reached out with both hands and hugged two black-and-tan heads close. Jupe and Juno, still whuffling anxiously, began to lick her face.

Not again. Digging her fingers into fur, she held on tightly. *Oh, damn, not again.*

* * *

The gray light of a late November afternoon slanted across her kitchen table. Glancing down at the pile of mail—mostly holiday catalogs—her ranch foreman had just brought in, Cassie noticed a brightly colored flier. More junk. Frowning, she pulled it free and turned for the wastebasket—

Then stopped, her grip creasing its glossy paper.

There on the cover, in Santa Fe orange and turquoise, danced a creature far too reminiscent of last night's terrors. PIPER WITH A PURPOSE, the copy read. *Authentic Ancient Designs for a Stronger Community.*

Cassie flipped the paper over. To her relief, she found no more art, only details. A charity workshop project founded several years ago in the Four Corners area, PIPER WITH A PURPOSE offered job skills training, housing assistance, substance abuse counseling, and other services. Native

Americans seemed to be its primary focus, but anyone in need was welcome.

COMING FOR CHRISTMAS! the copy promised. Now opening in SHERIDAN, WYOMING!

Cassie's stomach knotted. Sheridan was where she bought groceries and ran errands for Twenty Mile.

Her foreman glanced up from his own mail. "Something wrong?"

"Just junk."

Of all the people she'd rather not explain bad dreams to, Frank Yellowtail topped the list. Not that Frank wouldn't believe her. The grandson of a Crow *Batce Baxbe*, a "man of power," he had no trouble drawing correlations between the dreaming and waking worlds. Or between this world and other phenomena. The Outside.

In her three years here at Twenty Mile, Cassie had had her fill of the Outside.

Frank continued to look puzzled. Reluctantly, she handed the flier over. She did *not* want to admit to nightmares about Kokopelli, for Gawdsakes—

"You too?"

Cassie stared. Either Frank could read minds—which she couldn't quite believe, *Batce Baxbe* grandson or not—or he was confessing to bad dreams himself. Bad dreams about a tacky Southwestern icon.

Either way, it couldn't hurt to nod.

Her ranch foreman looked both embarrassed and relieved. "Not sure why, but I've had the same nightmare two or three times lately. The thing in them doesn't exactly look like this"—he tapped the flier—"but it's close. Same flute, same hunchback."

Cassie looked at the gaudy Kokopelli again. Did it even have a hunchback? At first glance, no. This was the smooth, cute, sanitized version from every tourist trap in Taos ... then, a few seconds later, it definitely wasn't.

Blink. Blink. Shift.

She glanced away from the flier in Frank's hand. "Sorry." A hopeful thought struck her. "Maybe they've already got a billboard or something. We might have both seen it on the way into town."

Frank shook his head. "There's no billboard." He hesitated. "Maybe these dreams are what Grandfather used to call 'frostbite.' It happened to

him a lot.”

“Frostbite?”

“You get frostbite once, cold bothers you more for the rest of your life. You get close to the Outside—”

Cassie nodded, feeling queasy.

“Question is, what’s a Kokopelli shop doing this far north? I thought he was strictly a Southwestern thing. Or at least, I hoped he was.”

Frank shrugged, shoulder blades prominent under his denim jacket. Then he handed Cassie the flier and turned to leave. He still had horses to feed.

Or maybe he didn’t like this conversation any more than she did.

After he was gone, Cassie poured herself coffee and sat down with the flier, Kokopelli side up. Blink. Blink. Shift—

Cursing, she flipped the image over quickly. She’d always found Kokopelli a little creepy, but the rock art image had never actually *frightened* her before.

Maybe anything Anasazi could spook her after last year’s field school at Zia House.

Taking a big glug of coffee to banish memories, Cassie started reading. This PIPER WITH A PURPOSE was only the latest in a series of workshops, including one in the Santa Fe/Taos area. Frank’s niece Julie Valdez, still working on her anthro grad degree from the U. of New Mexico, might know something. If PWP was peddling “authentic ancient designs,” it could be looking for academic inspiration. An e-mail was definitely in order.

Reading further, she found that PWP also welcomed what every other charity outfit did: cash and volunteers. Cash especially, of course, but extra hands for the holiday season were also needed.

Nothing like on-site research while giving back to the community.

By the time she finished, the windows were dark and both Rotts had joined her, looking for dinner. Cassie laid the flier aside with relief. Protective, intelligent, and uncomplicated, Jupe and his sister Juno deserved all the attention she could give. In her limited experience, dogs and the Outside did not get along—which had probably saved her life at least once.

After their meal, though, she’d fix herself a sandwich and hit the Internet. If she ever hoped to understand why Kokopelli haunted her dreams, she needed to know a lot more about him.

* * *

Hours later, she had all the facts anybody could want (and then some) about fluteplayer images in Southwestern rock art. Kokopelli was not one mythic figure, but several: Chu'lu'laneh at Zuni, sometimes; Ghanaskidi for some Navajo; Nepokwa'i for certain Hopi and Tewa. The sleek, genderless gift shop version came from Hohokam ceramics. Otherwise, Kokopelli was very male—with petroglyphs to prove it—when he wasn't shape-shifting into a locust.

Kokopelli was associated with rain, hunting, mist, snakes ... and, big surprise, fertility. He was a shaman and a trickster, like Raven or Coyote. His image showed up all over the Anasazi regions of the Four Corners area, wherever people had lived.

Nobody seemed to know how old Kokopelli was. Some sources attributed him to the Anasazi or older tribal groups. Others linked him to Mesoamerica, possibly the Mayans.

And not one gave her a clue about her nightmares.

Staring down at the useless pile of notes on her desk, Cassie rubbed her stinging eyes and shut off her computer. If she wanted real answers, there was only one place left to look: at the bottom of her closet, in a box she'd rather forget about entirely.

Tossing boots, an old jacket, and an even older quilt aside, she felt her hands shaking as she hauled it out. According to its logo, the battered container had once held beer. Now it held the legacy of Daniel McAllister, caretaker of Zia House—and former professor of Southwestern archaeology, contributor to the Chaco Project.

Former living human being. Or at least, she profoundly hoped he wasn't still alive.

Cassie had met McAllister a year ago last August, when Julie Valdez (and her uncle Frank) had convinced her to sign up for a field school in need of extra paying participants. Cassie had had enough anthro coursework at the U. of Wyoming to qualify—and a fascination with the Zia House specialty, Chaco Canyon.

Frank Yellowtail mistrusted the school. Due to a couple of missing students the year before—and the director's inability to account for them—Zia House had lost its accreditation months ago. Unfortunately, this hadn't

happened until after Julie's advisor had signed her up, and the university didn't give refunds. The more her uncle learned about the disappearances, the less he liked the idea of Julie being down there alone.

Even then, Cassie suspected, he'd caught a whiff of the Outside.

She had caught the same scent at that year's work site—which was also the site of last year's troubles. Just a small cave in the side of a wash a few miles from Chaco, but the school's director called it a "new paradigm" in Chacoan outliers.

Within the next few days, that paradigm had claimed two lives: another student, and Daniel McAllister.

She had found McAllister's box in the back of her Jeep while unpacking back at Twenty Mile. C. BARRETT PLEASE OPEN, it read on all four sides in black marker. Taped to the top was an envelope, also with her name on it.

Cassie had detached and hidden the envelope before carrying the box inside. Nearly a week later, she'd finally read his letter.

To Ms. Barrett, with my deepest apologies ...

What followed was an account of McAllister's unpublished discoveries during the Chaco Project—and for years afterwards, though by then he had neither the academic credentials nor the cash to travel much. During their only real conversation at Zia House, he had hinted at Southwestern links to much older myths: older than the Maya, the Olmecs, or humanity itself in North America.

Maybe on the planet.

In several heavily annotated pages, McAllister laid out the evidence behind these hints. Tunnels under kivas, and the strange metal artifacts that he'd found there. Sketches of carvings from caves—not outliers, no matter what Zia House's director had claimed—where there should have been nothing. Inscriptions in strange, writhing glyphs, though the Anasazi were illiterate. Petroglyphs that tracked neither the sun nor the moon, but the rising of Aldebaran.

Myths from the stars. Mythic beings (gods?) from the stars, cross-referenced to texts Cassie had never heard of. At least she recognized a few names now: Yig, Tulu, Tsath-something-or-other. McAllister had included more sketches. Some resembled petroglyphs, though the articles she'd read

on Southwestern rock art said such symbols could never be explained. They were mysteries, fading contacts with ancient spirituality—

What the hell?

At the bottom of the next-to-last page capered a sickeningly familiar form. Sketched from a petroglyph, it boasted an elaborate headdress of twining, writhing ... feathers, she hoped. Like most Kokopelli images, this one's instrument formed an extension of its face.

Unlike most, this extension had a life of its own, twisting away from the flutist toward a crudely indicated group of other figures. Some had two legs, most had four. All the four-leggers looked canine.

The two-leggers were cowering away. Unsuccessfully.

Kiva tunnel wall, Casa R., Chaco, McAllister's marginal note read. Poss. plastered over after creation? Binger p. 58—Nyar'la'a?

Swearing again under her breath, Cassie laid the pages aside and opened the box. On top of a stack of field journals lay a worn manila envelope marked BINGER, WESTERN OK 1928. Inside that was a pamphlet.

An Ethnographic Analysis of Certain Events ...

Her mind flashed back to that strange conversation with McAllister. He'd loaned her this monograph overnight, telling her it might explain that "outlier" where two grad students—three, by the end—had gone missing. She never had the chance to return it. In the end, she'd just stuck it in his box and tried to forget it.

She couldn't forget her brush with what it described, though. *Tsath in K'n-yan, decadent and terrible*—an underground city older than humanity, populated by the degraded spawn of those beings from the stars. K'n-yan could be reached by many gates. One had been inside a mound in Binger, Oklahoma.

Another had been a few miles outside Chaco Canyon.

Cassie started flipping through the monograph. Page fifty-eight listed several "gods" worshipped in the very lowest ... oldest ... levels of K'n-yan. Yig Serpent-Father. Tulu, who resembled the Moche "Decapitator." He of Tsath, a toadlike thing less revered than feared. And, near the bottom of the list, Nyar'la'a: forms unknown, possibly infinite.

Messenger of the exiled gods, the anonymous author had noted. *Bringer of chaos and nightmare. Associations: ritual music, wild beasts, madness.*

She read the entry over again, closed the pamphlet, and slipped it into its envelope. Then she laid the envelope on top of McAllister's field journals, shut the box, and shoved it as far back into her closet as possible.

It was only after that that she noticed McAllister's letter on the floor.

Wincing as her conscience bit hard, she carried it back to her desk. She did not want to finish rereading it tonight. Daniel McAllister had not filled all those pages—possibly on the last night of his life—merely to answer her questions about Southwestern mythology.

He had done it because he had no one else to tell. No one else who shared his experiences with the Outside.

Nobody but the director of Zia House, who had embraced it and been destroyed.

Now the Outside might be sniffing around Twenty Mile again, and she didn't want to think about it. Better to keep on believing that her nightmares (*and Frank's?*) were random nuisances. PIPER WITH A PURPOSE was just another charity project selling Southwestern gifts—

A project out of the Four Corners area. Kokopelli country.

Nyar'la'a.

She didn't even know how to pronounce it, but the word made her skin crawl. Switching on her desk lamp, Cassie turned to the conclusion of McAllister's letter.

Well, Ms. Barrett, that's the worst of it, at least as much as I dare put down. I hope you'll find this useful. I hope even more that you'll never have to, but there are plenty of Magda Hudsons in this world.

She bit her lip. Dr. Hudson was the reason McAllister was dead now. Hudson and her brand-new Chacoan paradigm.

Once you've seen these things for what they are, you can't ever look away. At least I couldn't. The world we think we live in now is just a skin—a modern skin—and every so often something else breaks through. Something too ancient to care about us monkeys, even if it bothers to notice us in the first place. Better it doesn't.

I doubt I'll be writing more field journals after tonight, so I'm handing these on. Read them or burn them, but for God's sake don't publish.

His signature was a ragged scrawl. After a few moments, Cassie folded the pages back into their envelope, then shoved the envelope behind the bookcase next to her desk.

But not so far she couldn't reach it again.

* * *

This time, there was no moon at all in her darkness. No suppurating sores of stars. There was only the glow of a newly kindled campfire, barely reaching the blackened walls of the cave she stood in.

Even so, pale images were beginning to manifest themselves from those walls. Ragged and primal, more ominous than she had ever imagined petroglyphs could be, they danced in the air for a moment before beginning their slow spiral upwards.

As the flames below leaped to meet them, a too-familiar wailing began.

Pipers all, the maddening notes of these figures rose as they did—swirled as they did, higher and higher, toward some unseen point overhead. Each figure was uniquely malformed. Some capered on two legs only, some locust-like on six, others on writhing tangles of lines. Almost all were hunchbacked. Their instruments—less pipes than appendages—elongated and curled in the firelight, driving her into shadows.

As they reached the very top of the cave, the pale figures began to converge. Writhing limbs wound themselves around and through each other. Headdresses intertwined. The humps and bulges of a dozen bent spines deformed even further, curving as one.

And now, suddenly, that image-cloud no longer gyrated overhead. The campfire illuminated one figure only—a twisted, still-shifting thing that did not shine in those leaping flames.

Instead, its very darkness diminished all light.

The music of its single pipe rose wilder than ever. Somewhere outside, a multitude of canine throats answered. The cave entrance, which had seemed desperately far away before, now felt all too near ... too full of unblinking eyes and crouching furred bodies. Belly-crawling like fearful pups, they pressed past her in the shadows, converging at the feet of—

Aroo! Aroo!

Jupe's voice and Juno's frantic tongue woke Cassie almost simultaneously. Reaching out at random, she grabbed Juno's neck and held on as she shook off the dream. Jupe stayed bristling by her second-floor window, howling from the depths of his heart at something outside.

Cassie bit her lip. Releasing her grip on Juno's ruff, she reached one hand under her bed.

The .44's snub nose caught on the carpet for one heart-stopped second, then came away clean. Swinging the heavy pistol onto her quilt, Cassie took several long breaths before getting to her feet and cocking the hammer back. Only then did she tiptoe toward the window, terrified and curious.

Jupe was quiet now, but he hadn't backed off and his hackles were still high. Parting the curtains, Cassie looked down.

The yellow eyes of a coyote stared back.

* * *

Wrapping her hands around her third mug of coffee that morning, Cassie slumped in her desk chair, staring at the e-mail on her screen. Julie Valdez hadn't wasted any time responding to the questions she'd sent last night.

Strange you should mention PWP up in Sheridan. We lost a lecturer to them just this past summer—she'd only been with the dept. 3 semesters. Tenure-track, too, but she got recruited and off she went. Said she wanted to do more for her people. Not sure whose rolls she was on, but it must have meant a lot to her. PWP wasn't offering squat for pay.

Like her uncle, Julie didn't mince words.

She said she'd been hired as a creative director, whatever that means for nonprofits. She was interested in rock art—did a lot of documentation and photography between semesters. Maybe PWP wanted some fresh designs?

I'm not sure what she's doing up your way now. Nobody here's heard from her for a couple of months.

Cassie's coffee turned to acid in her stomach. Relax, she told herself. Quit looking for trouble between the lines.

Still, she scrolled quickly.

I never met the guy who recruited her, but he must have been some salesman. The dept. secretary said he blew in like something out of a Hillerman novel—definitely on the rolls—and claimed he had an appointment. Went up to her office, talked to her for maybe thirty minutes, left whistling. She handed her resignation next day and was gone by the weekend. Didn't even finish out summer session!

I was pissed at her at the time—had to cover one of her classes—but later I got worried. She was always pretty passionate about her work, but that was it. Never drank, never partied. No boyfriend. I finally asked around the dept. until I got her address—a Sheridan P.O. box. No e-mail, even though she had a laptop.

I wrote her a couple of times, asking how the program was treating her. Got one reply on a postcard, then nothing.

Sorry I can't help more. Keep me posted, OK? PWP doesn't sound like a bad program, but I'm not sure what might be going on with this gal. Who knows, maybe she's the director there now. If you're thinking about volunteering, here's her name and address. Good luck!

Cassie took a long sip of lukewarm coffee. Then she wrote the name Julie had provided at the bottom of the PIPER WITH A PURPOSE flier and slipped it into her back pocket.

How do I not need this? Let me count the ways—

But first, she had a call to make.

* * *

It took some doing to get away from Twenty Mile unnoticed. Cassie didn't want to lie to Frank: lying to your foreman was a bad idea, and he'd always been able to read her way too easily. Still, it might be better for all concerned (including Julie) if he didn't find out about her going out to PWP—not until she'd started volunteering there.

After that, she hoped he'd understand for the sake of charity. Or curiosity.

Or frostbite.

The wind was screaming by the time she found the turnoff to the workshop. Grabbing the wheel whenever her old Wagoneer caught a gust, she bumped along nearly a mile of dirt track before reaching the site. Aside from another orange and turquoise Kokopelli—on a sign about twelve feet high—it was an unimpressive place, all prefab and trailers. The main facility might have been a tech school once. Several aging double-wides clustered nearby were probably PWP housing assistance.

Despite the weather, a couple of people in heavy jackets sat on the front steps of one of these. When she pulled up to the main building, they

disappeared inside.

The brown paper bag they'd been sharing remained behind.

Cassie tried not to notice, though she locked her vehicle before heading inside. The wind nearly tore the front door from her hands—and once she'd gotten it shut, she wondered why she'd bothered. Heat didn't seem to be a high priority. She guessed they were using propane and hoped to God that their system was maintained better than the rest of the place.

Plywood panels, more or less painted, divided the building's cavernous interior. The front section was office space. From the back came voices and intermittent noise from equipment, manufacturing or maybe packaging. Whatever it was, she wished she had earplugs.

"Need some help?"

A teenage girl edged around the nearest partition. She looked Native American or possibly Hispanic, rail-thin and very tired. Her grubby sweatshirt and jeans hung from her body.

"I've got an appointment to see your director about volunteering," Cassie said. "For four o'clock, but I think I'm a little early."

The girl stared at Cassie for a moment. Then she pointed down the hall (or what passed for one) with a skinny finger.

"Second from the back."

Before Cassie could thank her, she ducked back into her cubicle. Smoke from a freshly lit cigarette rose from behind the plywood. Mentally shaking her head, Cassie headed toward the back, noticing as she did so that some of the partitions featured artwork. Most of it was spray-painted, with or without stencils.

Rock art images. Some she'd never seen in any archaeology magazine.

Lots and lots of very strange pipers.

She started averting her eyes, though she knew this was stupid. Sure, a few looked too much like McAllister's sketches, but his had depicted actual rock art. Maybe workshop artists had been practicing newly discovered designs on the walls here. Julie's missing lecturer might have supplied a few.

The second cubicle from the back had an actual door. Cassie hesitated, then knocked.

Strains of a solo wooden flute drifted out to her.

"Come in."

It was a male voice, well-educated and bland. Professionally bland. She pushed the door open to reveal a fully office-sized space, with Navajo rugs covering most of the cement floor. All the walls here were white, more or less. There were only a couple of bookcases, mostly empty aside from what looked like Anasazi artifacts and the CD player emitting the Native American music.

The desk itself sat far to the back in one corner. Like the door, it bore no nameplate—only a cardboard tent with MARCUS GRAY in felt-tip marker. An elaborately carved and feathered flute on a stand completed the desktop décor.

“Ms. Barrett?”

Cassie nodded and took the folding chair in front of the desk. The man watching her reeked of Sixties-era social worker. Even in corduroy jeans and a sweater, she felt overdressed.

“I understand you’re interested in volunteering for the holiday season?” When Cassie nodded, he drew a yellow pad toward him and began making notes. “Have you done community service work before?”

“Not since Girl Scout cookies.”

Gray didn’t react. Perfect non-judgmental mode. “How did you happen to hear of Piper With a Purpose?”

She described the flier, willing her hands not to clench in her lap. “I’m intrigued by Southwestern archaeology,” she added. “Especially rock art.”

Was that a flicker of interest in those faded eyes?

“This workshop is primarily about helping people in the present—answering the needs of the community. Helping our clients make better life choices. Most know nothing about the cultural symbols we use, though many of them come from that culture.”

Not up here in Wyoming, I’m guessing.

“However, we do encourage them to explore spiritually.” He reached out a hand to the feathered flute. “There’s an incredible richness in these ancient cultures. The designs we use help to promote that, bring it into modern awareness.”

One finger stroked a feather. “I think our clients are better for it.”

The back of Cassie’s neck prickled. If she’d learned anything about the Outside, it was that some ancient cultures should stay buried.

“They certainly seem interested,” she finally said. “The wall murals I saw on the way to your office ... I’ve never seen anything quite like them.”

Not since my last nightmare, anyhow.

Marcus Gray brightened. “We’re proud of those designs. All authentic—though you won’t find some of them in the standard texts. They’re recent discoveries from sites very much off the beaten path.”

The folded flier in Cassie’s pocket crackled as she leaned forward. *Now or never.*

“I heard you hired a creative director some time back. I’m assuming she contributed some of those designs?”

Gray’s hand froze on the feathers.

“Dr. Lyn Trujillo, from the University of New Mexico.” Cassie’s throat tightened. “She’s a friend of a friend. From what I hear, you were lucky to recruit her.”

Or someone was. The man sitting across from her certainly didn’t match the description from Julie’s department secretary. He looked about as Native American as Cassie herself did.

So who was the mystery salesman?

“I’m afraid that arrangement didn’t work out, Ms. Barrett.” Disapproval crept into Gray’s voice. “She only lasted a few months here. We can’t afford to pay much, and the non-material rewards of the position weren’t enough, it seems.”

Cassie bit her lip. She hoped she looked embarrassed rather than alarmed.

Or suspicious.

“That’s too bad,” she managed. “I never met her, but I heard all about her rock art documentation. I was looking forward to seeing what she came up with for you.” She hesitated, trying to sound hopeful. “Unless those mural designs in the hall weren’t—”

“Some of them.”

Whatever enthusiasm she’d seen in those eyes was gone now. Before she could ask more questions, Gray passed her a clipboard. It held a standard volunteer information form and a cheap ballpoint pen.

“Given our holiday rush,” he said as she worked through it, “you’re welcome to start whenever you wish. We ask for at least two-hour sessions, preferably at least twice a week.”

Cassie agreed to start the next day, listed her preferred hours, and handed the clipboard back. Gray didn't rise to see her out.

Strains of his office music—minor, plaintive, disturbing—followed her down the hallway. The lights had dimmed since her arrival. One overhead fluorescent was in its death throes, flickering shadows across the murals. After the first couple of panels, Cassie shifted her gaze straight ahead and walked quickly, telling her imagination to shut the hell up.

By the time she reached her Jeep, she was losing that argument.

Sundown this time of year gave the wind an extra edge. Her numb fingers fumbled her keys into the dirt. Muttering under her breath, she crouched to retrieve them—then sprang up as footsteps thudded toward her from the main building.

“Hey! You almost forgot this!”

Before she could react, the skinny teenage receptionist thrust something at her and ran away, veering toward the cluster of double-wides. Cassie didn't even think about following. She unlocked her vehicle and slid in fast, locking all four doors before driving away at the maximum sane speed for conditions.

Thin snow had joined the wind by the time she reached the highway, snaking across it as she pulled over and flicked on her overhead light. The receptionist's gift—a battered blue spiral notebook—lay on the passenger seat.

Cassie flipped open the cover. *Lyn Trujillo, Ph.D.*, in shaky blue ink. *Her Dream Journal*.

* * *

Several hours later, fortified by a few sips from a stiff rum and Coke, Cassie switched on her desk lamp and took a deep breath. Trujillo's journal, she reminded herself, was no different from the serious weirdness McAllister had left her. It might be one more minor artifact, recording somebody's brush with the Outside. It might be nothing at all.

Blue spiral notebooks don't bite.

And even if they did, they'd be outmatched. Jupe and Juno had followed her upstairs after dinner tonight, just as they'd been doing every evening

lately. Before that flier had shown up, Cassie had blamed the approaching winter solstice: cold darkness meant hole up with the pack.

Now she wasn't so sure. Maybe Frank's frostbite wasn't limited to humans.

Flipping past the oddly formal title page, Cassie found that Trujillo had started her journal in late August—not immediately after arriving, but while she still might have been in contact with Julie or other colleagues.

Gray says we are all “here”—who knows if he means PWP or Wyo. or this planet—to explore our spirituality, so here goes. For three nights now, I’ve been having the first spiritual dreams of my life. No clear details, just the sensation of something incredibly old & powerful. Sometimes I see rock art images, but nothing I can draw after I wake up. Not sure why the art’s there, but isn’t that how it is with dreams? I’m going to leave this journal by my bed from now on. Maybe sketching sooner will help.

Two days later, Trujillo sounded frustrated.

Still nothing. Nothing I can use for my designs here, anyhow. I’ve shown Gray all the books I brought with me—hundreds of petroglyphs & sketches—but he keeps asking for something fresh. Authentic but fresh. Says to get in touch with my own “deep understanding” of the culture this art came from, though how I can do that when the Anasazi weren’t even literate is beyond me.

Gray asked me tonight how my work is coming along. I think he meant my dreams, partly—he asks everybody about their dreams, even the clients. Maybe he’s a Jungian or something. Some of the clients really get him going. The stuff they come up with!

There were no entries for several days after that. Then, in the middle of an otherwise blank page, Trujillo had drawn a bowed tangle of lines with a single protrusion emerging from the right side, toward the top. Two more protrusions at the bottom seemed meant as feet.

The scribble was dated September first.

I hope Gray’s happy, Trujillo had written on the facing page. That damn flute tape—he told me listen to it before bed, so I did & what do I get? Same dreams I’ve been having off & on ever since I got here, but now they’ve got a soundtrack. Did manage to see one of the glyphs a little better, though. Tried drawing it when I woke up, but it’s nothing worth working with.

Cassie took another look at the scribble.

Then she reached for her rum and Coke and started flipping pages.

Kokopelli first appeared in the entry for September eighth. Trujillo was complaining about PWP's logo. How, she wondered, could she create anything fresh with the biggest cliché in the Southwest in her face everywhere she went? Admittedly, the items this workshop shipped out bore some very interesting variants—

It was bound to happen, she wrote two days later. The ancient spiritual presence in my dreams is now Kokopelli. Or something similar, though I've never seen real petroglyphs quite like what I saw tonight. Fortunately.

There was a bonfire or something—a fire in a cave. Glyphs all over the walls, & they were all Kokopelli & they weren't. There were flutes, & a wind. Then the glyphs started dancing ...

Please, Cassie thought, let there not be coyotes.

There weren't, but only (she suspected) because Trujillo's alarm had gone off shortly afterward. At the bottom of the page, Trujillo had drawn a whole line of her dancing glyphs: two-legged and six-legged, hunchbacked and not. Almost all had flute-like appendages, and a few looked intertwined.

No need to dig out McAllister's field journals. Cassie had been through most of them by now, and he'd made his own sketches. Images from tunnels running under certain kivas, from the backs of obscure caves and shadowed, inaccessible cliff faces.

Nyar'la'a.

Well, I've finally come up with a few designs Gray likes, Trujillo wrote about a week later. Says I'm finally in touch with that "deep understanding." He's already ordering stencils for stuff like coffee mugs—if I can come up with something really striking, he'll do holiday cards. Or a new cover for those flute CDs the shops in Taos love.

I know I ought to be thrilled—this is what I'm here for, right?—but I'm not. We lost two clients last night. One overdosed & one hung himself. Same night I dreamed most of this art Gray's so high on—I was working up the prelim sketches when I found out. I wish I'd torn them up, but I needed something for this morning's meeting.

By the end of September, Trujillo's handwriting looked ragged. Her sketching, however, had improved.

Started the pencil work today for that hallway mural Gray wants. It's going to take a couple of evenings, but at least the clients will be helping with the painting. I've cut stencils for a lot of that—Gray's suggestion. Stencils and spray paint, though I hate having paint around. We've got one or two huffers—pretty damaged—& they don't need temptation.

She'd added a couple of images Cassie recognized from her visit to PWP. One, she noted, had impressed Gray so much he was using it for the CD covers.

Not sure it's worth it, though, she wrote a day or two later. The dreams are getting worse. Sometimes in a cave, sometimes outside, but always the damn flute & the glyphs & now coyotes. They howl like mad when the big one starts assembling itself—no, HIMSELF. Definitely HIMSELF.

Started work on the mural tonight after dinner.

The rest of the page held sketches, most still similar to those in McAllister's field journals. The last, however, showed HIMSELF in the act of forming. Cassie flipped the page and reached for her rum and Coke again.

The glass was empty.

I told Gray to keep that paint locked up. I've rounded up all the cans now & pitched them—the mural's nearly done & what isn't yet I'll do—but too late for ... Cassie raised the notebook, squinting, but the name was illegible. *We'll be lucky if the county doesn't shut this place down. Maybe it should. The clients aren't making progress, & the dreams they tell Gray keep getting sicker.*

One girl I work with (good artist, when she's sober) says there's screaming in her trailer almost every night. Nightmares. She wants to leave, but it's too cold on the street in town.

Cassie scanned down the page. Trujillo's handwriting was a mess, but the same couldn't be said for her dream sketches. By mid-October, she'd switched to colored pencils and felt-tip pens.

Sickly green moons. Festering holes of stars.

And rising up against them, twisted and lean and hideous, something that raised its face to those stars ... tore at them with straining appendages of that face—

Cassie flipped past, to the end of the notebook, then dropped it on her desk. There were no more words to read anyway. Trujillo's final entries

hadn't even been dated, though she had obviously been trying to communicate something. More dreams? Waking hallucinations?

So much for artistic inspiration at PWP.

Whatever Lyn Trujillo had hoped to accomplish there, Marcus Gray was right. The arrangement had not worked. Cassie was starting to wonder exactly how badly it hadn't—and how that receptionist had gotten hold of something so personal as Trujillo's dream journal.

Three client deaths. At least. And Gray said Trujillo wasn't there any more, that the non-material rewards hadn't been enough—

Muttering a few choice words, Cassie dragged McAllister's carton out of her closet and put the notebook inside. Jupe and Juno seemed to approve. Both Rotts settled close beside her chair, sighing themselves to sleep as she booted up her computer.

And began a very difficult e-mail to Julie Valdez.

* * *

Aside from her own nerves—and that God-awful road out to the facility—Cassie's first week volunteering went well enough. To her relief, she wasn't asked to manufacture any Kokopelli products, though she'd been told that some were handmade in-house. Instead, she spent her two hours per shift packing boxes for mailing.

The intermittent racket she'd heard on her first visit turned out to be a conveyor belt that carried boxes past the workers, allowing ample time to check packing slips and select items from stock kept on shelves behind them. In theory. In practice, the belt was down more often than not—and even when it wasn't, her fellow workers were none too helpful. Most were PWP clients: recovering addicts, possibly recovering alcoholics, and psychiatric cases.

The few volunteers from town, mostly church groups, never showed up more than once or twice.

There were a couple of staff members as well. They wore denim shirts with the garish PWP logo and looked more like prison guards or bouncers. Other than fixing the belt when it broke down, they did almost nothing. Equipped with folding chairs, cigarettes, and a cooler full of Pepsi, they just sat and watched the clients.

A few of these—generally the psych cases—hummed along to the piped-in work music. It was always solo Native American flute, like the stuff she'd heard in Gray's office, and it wore on her nerves. After her first day, she kept a pair of shooting earplugs in her jacket pocket.

After her second, she wore them almost continuously.

Cassie drove home dead tired on Friday afternoon, fighting the wind and the road and her lack of decent sleep. She had volunteered for five days straight. For the past four nights, the music she'd blocked at the workshop had returned in her dreams, woven through the voices of coyotes.

She needed a hot meal. And a very hot shower.

The scent of the first—followed by two ecstatic Rotts—greeted her as she walked through the door. Cassie knelt and hugged both dogs, then headed for the kitchen. Frank Yellowtail was already there, settled at one end of the table with the day's mail and a mug of coffee. She poured one for herself and joined him.

Since the dreams had started—or at least, since they'd admitted to them—she and Frank had been eating dinner together often. The idea had been hers, but he'd been more than willing to help out. It was easy enough for her to shove a casserole in the oven or start a pot of soup before leaving for PWP.

Easier than coming home to darkness, anyhow. She suspected Frank felt the same.

Cassie set her coffee down on the *Sheridan Press*, which had been left folded open across her placemat. She frowned: Frank generally lacked patience with news outside the cattle business. Since when had that changed?

The article's terse headline didn't help much. *Woman, 31, Found Frozen to Death.*

Judging from the accompanying photo, it was the kind of story most papers ran this time of year to help the Salvation Army kettles. The sad fact was that transients got wasted and collapsed in alleys all year round.

Lyn Trujillo, a former client of Piper With a Purpose—

"No." Cassie's hands tightened on the paper. She picked it up to examine the photo, then shook her head. She'd never met Trujillo. That blanket-wrapped form slumped against a Dumpster could have been anyone.

I'm afraid that arrangement didn't work out, Ms. Barrett—

“This had to be a mistake.” Cassie pushed the article in Frank’s direction. “Trujillo was their creative director, not a client! There’s no way she could have ended up like that. Julie said she didn’t even drink—”

She stopped short at the look on his face. *Damn.*

Lacking children of his own, Frank was a devoted uncle. From past experience, Cassie knew all too well how he felt about her getting Julie involved in anything strange.

“I know,” he said. “I called her this morning. We had a good long talk.”

Which meant, it turned out, that he knew all about her recent e-mails to his niece. Why she’d really started volunteering at PWP, and what she she’d learned from Trujillo’s dream journal. Not surprising that Julie had wanted her uncle’s opinion on that. Frank’s grandfather had been a powerful dreamer, and Cassie suspected he’d inherited some talent.

Not a good thing, lately.

“If you want to see that journal yourself,” she offered, “I’ll get it. I should have let you check it out in the first place.” To her surprise, Frank shook his head.

“You’d better leave it alone, too. From what Julie told me, nothing in it could make any difference now. Trujillo got too close.”

Cassie nodded, wincing at another touch of frostbite.

Frank looked at her sharply. “Maybe you should quit volunteering there.”

“Don’t you think I haven’t already considered it?”

The words burst out with a surprising mix of anger and fear. Staring down at the article to avoid his reaction, Cassie felt a cold certainty: she did have to go back to PWP. Whatever had happened to Lyn Trujillo—and several clients—there wasn’t like last year at Zia House. It wasn’t something lurking in some remote cave.

Whatever Trujillo had seen in her dreams had a toehold right here.

After a moment, Frank picked up the paper and threw it on the floor.

“I figured you’d say that.” His face was expressionless now. “You and Julie, when you get an idea into your heads—” He sighed. “There’s something going on out there, all right, and we both know what it feels like. Maybe there’s nothing to be done about it, either.”

Cassie swallowed the dessert in her throat. Frank was making good sense, but he didn’t know the whole story. He only knew what Julie had told

him.

Not what Marcus Gray had announced this afternoon.

“You’re probably right,” she finally said, “but I’ve got to keep going for a while longer. The Little America in Cheyenne just placed a huge order, so there’ll be an all-night packing party on the twenty-first.”

Frank Yellowtail frowned. Twenty Mile had its own bad solstice history.

“We’re going to have a special visitor that night, too,” Cassie added. “The director won’t say who, just that he’s very important to ‘the mission of our program.’ Like a founder or something.”

Frank wasn’t frowning any more.

The creases in his face looked more like crevasses.

* * *

In the end, they’d compromised. She would cut back on her hours and carry her cell phone whenever she was at PWP. She would also keep her nose out of Trujillo’s dream journal. In return, Frank would back her decision to keep volunteering until the twenty-first.

When she asked what “backing” meant, he handed her the keys to his pickup.

“We need to swap vehicles, at least on the days you’re going out there.”

Cassie blinked. Frank had recently traded off his ancient green monster for a two-year-old Ford half-ton in gleaming black. She’d never borrow it for a grocery run, let alone that miserable drive out the workshop.

“Why?”

“To bring the dogs with me,” he said, avoiding her eyes. “If you call.”

For a moment, the statement didn’t make sense. Then she nodded.

“Coyotes.”

Though they were smart about them, Jupe and Juno hated coyotes—and most of the “song dogs” around Twenty Mile stayed clear of the big Rotts. Cassie wasn’t sure what one coyote under her window and a whole pack in her dreams (not to mention Trujillo’s) meant in the waking world.

Still, coyotes did seem connected with whatever was wrong at PWP. And Frank would no more risk the dogs than she would. If he thought they might be useful in a crisis, or prevent one—

Cassie had handed over her Jeep keys. She carried her phone and cut her hours and tried to ignore Marcus Gray's bursts of irritation.

But now, well into the evening of the twenty-first, she was starting to regret her decision.

To begin with, she'd never had to work with *all* PWP's clients before. Not counting yet another church group (which had disappeared within the first two hours) there had to be at least thirty people here tonight. Some looked intoxicated or high or both, though the staff wasn't paying much attention. They were too busy catering to tonight's special visitor.

The guy had arrived around sunset, escorted by Gray himself. Lean and wiry like a cowboy—and busted up like one, too. His back twisted under the flame-colored Western shirt he wore with black Levis and silver-toed boots. His black felt hat—sporting the flashiest concha band Cassie had ever seen—rode low over his eyes, obscuring his face.

Feathers fluttered at the back of his belt. The ornamented flute from Gray's office, or one suspiciously similar, had been stuck through it casually.

Trujillo's recruiter?

Whatever he did for PWP, Gray's mumbled introduction left it a mystery. Cassie hadn't even managed to catch the guy's name above the rumble of the conveyor belt, and Gray hadn't stuck around for questions. Instead, he had muttered something else about a phone call and disappeared—leaving the visitor to account for himself, which he didn't. He seemed to prefer working to talking, which was fine with Cassie.

For the first few hours, anyway.

The belt was running fine tonight, miracle of miracles, but she could still hear the usual work music above it—and she hadn't had the time or privacy to put in her earplugs yet. At least half a dozen people were humming along, some even swaying as they packed the CDs Gray had such high hopes for.

Glancing at Lyn Trujillo's cover art as the jewel boxes slid through her hands, Cassie shuddered. Were there coyotes lurking in that unfocused background?

"Break in five minutes, people," shouted one of the staff. "Let's get these boxes sealed for the truck."

As the zip of packing tape replaced the belt's rumble, Cassie glanced at the workroom clock. Ten-thirty already. The minor wail of the flute was giving her a headache, setting her nerves on edge and tweaking her paranoia. Glare from the overhead lights threw shadows she couldn't quite account for.

The air smelled funky, too. She wondered again about the heating system, and headed outside as soon as possible.

Even the wind had to be better than this.

After detouring around a knot of smokers—not all of them favoring tobacco—near the back door, Cassie worked her way around the building, staying close to the wall. She'd been right about the wind. It was nastier than usual tonight, buffeting what few security lights still worked. By the time she reached the parking lot out front, she was shivering persistently.

Frank's pickup was still safely where she'd parked it, though, in the farthest space from the front door. Relief washed through her. *Why not just leave?* the voice of reason suggested. *Hop in, go home. Bail from this creepy situation.*

Then she noticed another parking space, directly by the door. It was empty ... except for DIRECTOR stenciled in white paint.

Fishing in her pocket with numb fingers, Cassie grabbed her cell phone and flipped it open. As it sometimes did, the two-word curse of rural America appeared onscreen.

No service.

* * *

To her surprise, everyone who had gone on break was actually back when the conveyor belt started up again. Dirty looks directed at the two staff members told her why—or at least how. The *why* of nearly everything about this evening was turning mysterious as the clock's hands crawled toward twelve.

Starting with where the hell Marcus Gray was, on this Very Important Night he'd been ranting about for the past week.

Focus on what's going on here. Now.

Tonight's special visitor wasn't working so hard, though everyone else seemed to be. PWP's clients were packing CDs and other Kokopelli

merchandise as though their messed-up lives depended upon it. Some looked twitchy, sweating profusely in the chilly room. Others were zoned out, slaving away in their own private worlds.

The visitor was walking among them now, though he didn't seem to be saying much. Maybe he was whispering. Certainly he was leaning in close, touching some of the women who looked particularly nervous. The teenage receptionist she'd met on her first day here was following him around like a starving puppy.

As the woman next to her reached out for his sleeve, Cassie turned away quickly. The woman's expression when she glanced back chilled her.

Passive. Sheep-like. Glazed.

Meanwhile, Cassie's temples were starting to throb. The work music had grown louder, piercingly insistent, and she was sure now that the heating system had problems. At least the overhead lights weren't glaring any more. They had dimmed noticeably since their return from break, though neither the staff nor anyone else seemed to have noticed.

Eleven-thirty now.

Eleven thirty-five. Was the belt speeding up?

At eleven-forty, the staff hauled open the rolling door in one wall. A large van had been backed up to the other side. With more speed than she'd have thought possible, both staff members and a few of the fitter male clients started lifting boxes onto handcarts for the van. Wind from the open door howled past unnoticed.

By eleven fifty-five, the job was almost done. As a final box went in at midnight, Cassie heard the conveyor belt stop ... and the work music, more intense than ever, rising to fill the auditory void. She dug in her pocket for her earplugs.

As she palmed them, another sound began, weaving through the flute recording and the wind outside. It was rasping and ancient, yet a part of her recognized it even before she glanced across the room.

Gray's feathered flute wasn't stuck through their visitor's belt any more. He was playing it, his body curved over the elaborately carved tube almost like an extension of the instrument. What came from it was less music than breath—a wordless ritual, an artifact out of time before civilization. Or thought.

Or humanity.

Most of the people around her were already swaying in place. A few moaned. The young receptionist gasped softly, then sidled around her table and began slow-stepping toward the music, head thrown back and long hair streaming.

Moving toward the center of the workroom to join her, their visitor played louder. Other women—then a few men—began to copy the girl's steps. It looked like the most natural thing in the world, a physical evolution of the music.

A ceremony in the making.

Every frostbitten nerve in Cassie knew that much, even as her own body began to sway. Forcing herself down on her knees behind one of the tables, she fumbled with the earplugs she'd manipulated so easily moments ago. One nearly slipped from her grasp—but the effect was astonishing. Cut off from the wail of the visitor's flute, she found herself back in charge of her muscles.

And in danger of being noticed by anyone still paying attention.

Easing back up, Cassie tried to copy the rhythm of those closest to her. Her earplugs hadn't gone in perfectly: enough of the music leaked through to let her follow along, maybe too well. Shuffling and slow-stepping through the dimming light, the knot of PWP clients and staff swept her up. Wind gusting through the loading door pushed them all along, following the flute-player toward the only other door in the room.

Most of them had used it on their way back from break. Now it gaped open onto a pitch-black corridor far longer than any Cassie remembered in this building. As the dancing crowd disappeared inside, she felt the first stirrings of panic.

What had Daniel McAllister said about “many gates”?

Still the visitor with his flute played on, ever-changing yet somehow monotonous. Caught up in the rhythm, the others swayed after him into the darkness, some moaning under their breaths. Ahead—*but how far ahead?*—hints of dim light flickered against the walls.

The scent of piñon pine grew stronger as they approached. Piñon smoke ... as from a newly kindled fire. Cassie's panic rose even as her feet carried her along. This was nowhere in the PWP complex, she was certain. This was a waking dream, a collective primal nightmare, a footnote from Trujillo's last desperate scribbles.

This was a wound in the modern skin of the world.

Abruptly, the corridor ended in a cave some cringing part of her already recognized. A small central campfire threw shadows on the soot-blackened walls, summoning pale ghosts of petroglyphs. They danced in imitation of the one who capered and piped in the firelight, throwing sparks from the conchas of his hatband and the silver-mounted toes of his boots.

Men and women all around her joined in that dance. Someone even had a hand drum, its soft malignant heartbeat growing stronger as the flames leaped up.

Cassie struggled against that rhythm. Like a swimmer fighting current, she forced herself away, toward the nearest curve of stone. Other bodies flowed into the gap she made. The dance and the music and the flames began to blend, calling malformed petroglyphs from the walls to writhe in the air above their heads.

And as they did—as the shadows writhed with them—the piper’s flame-colored shirt turned to actual fire, enveloping him for an instant.

Murmurs of awe and terror rose from the other dancers. Out of that brief conflagration, something taller, leaner, and far less human was unfolding. Still piping, curved over and around the appendage of its instrument, it shook its ... *head, surely* ... until tatters of black felt and silver fell away.

Cassie pressed herself further into the shadows.

Turned her own head away, but not quickly enough.

“*Nyar’la’a!*” The syllables tore themselves from a dozen straining throats at once. “*Nyar’la’a!*”

A sudden gust of wind blew through the cave ... blew *down* from the distant ceiling which was no longer solid, if it ever had been. Live coals spattered from the fire. Cassie glanced up. Through whatever the smokehole had become, she could see stars.

Too many stars, even for rural Wyoming. Too many stars in very wrong colors, torn by a wind which blew out of somewhere unimaginably desolate, inconceivably cold.

“*Nyar’la’a! Nyar’la’a!*”

More voices, this time—and not all of them human. There were dozens of coyotes somewhere outside this cave, lending their responses to the wind and the chant. The rising, writhing chaos of it all. Biting her lip to focus

herself, Cassie picked up the rhythm of the dance again, swaying back toward the corridor which she desperately hoped still existed.

“Nyar’la’a!”

She had almost reached the darkness when something landed on her shoulder. A large, beefy hand—staff, probably—hailed her backwards, toward the firelight and discovery. Cassie grabbed onto a protruding rock ledge, then kicked back with all her strength. Her captor howled. She kicked again, to the kneecap, and his grasp loosened. Twisting away, she bolted down the corridor.

And nearly gagged on the chemical stench spewing into the air behind her.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Cassie cursed and redoubled her speed. There were people coming after her, all right, but pursuit was the least of her problems. Or theirs. Whatever ancient nightmare had manifested itself tonight, it hadn’t been real enough to turn gas line into solid rock.

* * *

Freezing wind hit her in the face as she jumped through the loading door. Cassie landed hard and scrambled to her feet, intent on getting as far from the facility as possible. PWP hadn’t maintained its heating system to start with. A broken line wouldn’t help, and if any of that fire in the dream-cave had actually been—

What the hell?

Still several yards from the parking lot—let alone Frank’s pickup and some chance of leaving—Cassie stopped dead, staring into the night around her. Pair after pair of narrow yellow eyes stared back.

Associations: ritual music, wild beasts, madness.

Already two for three.

From where she stood, she could see coyotes ring the area. Lean shadows just beyond the security lights, they sat back on their haunches and watched her, apparently waiting for her next move.

Did coyote packs ever attack human beings?

Moot question. The natural laws of the rest of the world no longer applied out here, and her gut knew it. She had seen things tonight that

nothing in McAllister's notes or her own brushes with the Outside had prepared her for ... nothing wind and sky and earth were meant to contain.

Without warning, the closest coyote threw back its head in song. It was a weird, tormented wail unlike anything she'd ever heard around Twenty Mile, and it penetrated her earplugs effortlessly.

As the rest of the pack joined in, Cassie bolted for the parking lot.

She expected pursuit, strong jaws dragging her down, but it never came. What did was the blast of a propane explosion—then a second, smaller blast as the delivery van's gas tank caught. Running for her life now, she headed for the farthest space out. The comforting bulk of a Ford half-ton ... if she could only unlock it in time—

Headlights flashed on to meet her.

Jeep headlights.

Frank Yellowtail scrambled from the driver's seat, then reached back inside for a shotgun from the rack. His mouth started moving as Cassie reached him. Shaking her head, she pulled out both earplugs and gasped her thanks.

"How'd you know to come?" she asked, as he passed her the weapon and headed for the Jeep's back cargo door. "I tried to call you, but—"

"The dogs told me."

Cassie frowned. Rather than asking her for his keys—or just climbing back into her vehicle and getting the hell out of Dodge—Frank was opening the door for Jupe and Juno. Both wore their heavy leather leashes, which he grabbed as they emerged.

And started barking challenge at the coyote ring.

"What's that mean?" she yelled over the Rotts.

"Every coyote around our place started up about an hour ago. The dogs went nuts, started giving it right back—and then they stopped. No more barking, no more howling. No more coyotes. It didn't sound natural, somehow. When Jupe started in on the front door, I thought we'd better get out here."

He glanced down at the furious dogs. "All of us."

Despite the weirdness of the situation, Cassie sighed. That door had taken a lot of abuse in the past couple of years—but the idea of Frank waiting at the house for her call was reassuring. She needed reassuring right now.

Speaking of right now, why weren't they leaving?

Frank pointed past her to the coyotes. "We met more coming in. A lot more than I've ever seen around here—bigger, too. Like wolves."

In the fitful light from the propane fire, Cassie saw his expression change.

"I don't think they're going to let us leave," he said. "Not until this is over."

Cassie wasn't sure what "this" was, but she kept both hands on the shotgun. Things looked pretty much over to her—aside from the damn coyotes, anyway. The main PWP facility blazed like a torch, and the wind was spreading flames to a couple of the trailers. Surely nobody in there was still alive. There wasn't even any screaming, the way you'd expect—

Abruptly, the coyotes fell silent. So did Jupe and Juno, though they stood their ground, the fur on their necks and shoulders bristling.

A line of shadows was emerging from the holocaust of the main facility. Some new and terrible wailing twisted itself into the wind, rising above it tunelessly. Ragged bursts of mad laughter responded.

Cassie's breath caught. At the head of the line, lean and hunched and utterly inhuman, capered the image of her nightmares.

She did not understand how any of those following it ... *him, oh yes, him* ... could still be alive, or even if they were. Stumbling, dragging ruined limbs behind them, they staggered through the wind and the night like unstrung marionettes. Thick black strands trailed from their leader's headdress. Coiling and whipping in defiance of the wind's direction, they lashed back at random into the line.

Shrieks followed.

Cassie bit her lip, hoping none of them were hers.

The coyotes were on the move now. Whimpering, they broke their ring and belly-crawled toward the piper, flattening themselves at his feet. He danced over them heedlessly. Rolling clear (most of them, anyhow), they trotted along beside the others, causing some of them to flinch away.

Cassie pressed herself closer to Jupe and Juno.

Blink. Blink Shift.

Shadowy petroglyphs, two-leggers and four-leggers and Kokopelli himself, dancing forever on a kiva tunnel wall no one was ever meant to

see. The faithful record of a primal nightmare ... or a primal memory. Daniel McAllister's sketch from the last night of his life.

The world we think we live in now is just a skin—a modern skin—and every so often something else breaks through.

She blinked again. The line was turning away from the facility, away from the flaming outbuildings and the road. Its leader was drawing farther ahead, and the coyotes with him—yet the others kept staggering along behind, into the snow-flecked void and the shifting wind. It blew from true north now, a Canadian blast carrying the first flakes of a storm.

Jupe and Juno snuffled at her knees. When she didn't move, Frank Yellowtail laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I think it's over," he said. "Let's go while we still can."

The distant shriek of a fire engine punctuated his words. As she loaded the dogs back into her Jeep and coaxed its engine to life, Cassie tried not to think what those would-be rescuers would find in the morning.

What they would not find, she knew, would be tonight's visitor. He, like Marcus Gray, was already on some other road, spreading chaos ancient as the stars she dared not look up at yet. And with every PWP workshop, every coffee mug or greeting card or flute CD, another little piece of this world would fall apart.

Nyar'la'a. Messenger of the exiled gods.

Whatever the message had been tonight, she hoped she never understood it.

We Are Made of Stars

JONATHAN THOMAS

Providence native Jonathan Thomas has persisted in writing weird fiction amidst (or despite) such diverse livelihoods as postal clerk, artist's model, and percussionist. His collections include Stories from the Big Black House (Radio Void, 1992), Midnight Call (2008), Tempting Providence (2010), Thirteen Conjurations (2013), and Dreams of Ys (2015; all from Hippocampus Press). A novel, The Color Over Occam (2012), is available through DarkFuse. Magazine appearances include Vampirella (Warren, 1978), PostScripts (PS Publishing, 2010), and Nameless (Cycatrix Press, 2012).

He keeps the world as his disguise ... The leader of the starry skies ...
—TIM SMITH OF CARDIACS

IRA WASTED NO SYMPATHY ON THE HACK FROM THE Preservation Commission. Photo op or no, who wore three-piece Armani to man a power washer? And with foolhardy bare hands? In sensible navy-blue jumpsuits, Ira and his DPW duo stayed upwind (as did the *Journal* reporter and cameraman) of clumsy assault on defiantly indelible graffiti “We are made of stars” above an illegible signature. From misapplied nozzle billowed a cloud of agitated droplets, and jets ricocheted everywhere.

The gray granite wall of St. John’s Cathedral was 200-plus years old, and magenta scribble bloomed beside a padlocked, weathered side door. When laden breeze shifted perilously, the onlookers backed further among the churchyard’s worn and broken gravestones, in even sadder shape than the cathedral. The property had been vacant for months, victim of shrinking congregation and untenable upkeep, a candidate for the wrecking ball. Preservation Commission gesture of solidarity with the mayor’s Graffiti Taskforce was a classic case of too little, too late.

Too bad about historic architecture like this, but why get all sentimental? Progress and omelets alike demand some breakage, do they not? Meanwhile, the dapper, sopping idiot persevered with pneumatic blaster to laughable effect, and the photographer angled for a spray-free shot, like a jackal angling for one-eyed wildebeest’s blind side.

Wandering attention led Ira’s eyes around the cemetery, in its artificial hollow bound south, east, and north by church wall, fieldstone retaining wall, and a nursing home. Atop seven-foot retaining wall was a railed promenade accessible to more active seniors, several of whom glumly surveyed the compressor-powered spectacle. A male orderly in turquoise was rubbernecking too, and over everyone’s shoulders peered a passerby from off Benefit Street, an artistic type, hardly unusual with RISD four blocks down. Detached, hipper-than-thou demeanor gave him away. In Ira he instantly triggered feelings of affinity and resentment.

He could have passed for Ira’s prodigal self, dropping by from parallel universe to taunt him. Same rough age, height, photogray lenses. Skin-deep differences between them Ira chalked up to *plein air* versus deskbound lifestyles. Prodigal self, beneath brown leather jacket, was concave where Ira was convex. Prodigal’s sun-kissed tan in April made Ira self-conscious

of year-round doughy white, and flippant silver forelock mocked Ira's receded hairline. Hell, the teenage Ira had harbored decidedly artistic leanings, but nobody had to tell him he'd be a damn sight safer majoring in business.

Impatient tap on the shoulder restored him to bleak reality. The two damp, fed-up newshounds were violating his personal space. They'd gotten what they came for, the writer mouthed over the roar of compressor. Goodbye! The so-called preservationist was still at it, venting mercifully private frustrations on unyielding spray paint. Ira signaled his crew to kill the noise. When high-pressure stream conked out, overdressed shoulders slumped as if a trance had lifted. Neo-yuppie turned stiffly, and fastidious beard sparkled with beaded-up water as he wailed, "I'm all wet!"

And dude, you're the last to notice, thought Ira, who said instead, "We're parked in the church lot down on North Main. Should be a towel on the passenger seat."

Photo opportunist's glower projected silent accusation he'd been tricked into dousing himself. Where was civilization headed, Ira pondered, with this level of chronic mistrust between private and public sectors? "Thanks. The Commission's around the corner. I'll change there," the twit demurred in frostiest patrician monotone. Cloaked in bruised and shivering dignity, hands red and raw, he tromped up brick path to stone stairs up to the promenade and then Benefit Street.

Ira beckoned at his Taskforce, lounging on tabletop tombs. "Let's show our fans how it's done." During inch-by-inch erasure of "We are made of stars," Ira puzzled at artsy sentiment's appeal to a delinquent. The audience, including his bothersome, mismatched doppelgänger, had dispersed from the railing when next Ira checked.

By the evening rush, smudgy column of smoke presiding over downtown would have apprised Commission twit his self-promotion had been wasted, even if he'd missed that thud like a piledriver impact, followed by sirens. Damn, it's happened again, mulled Ira during ten o'clock news, not the least heartbroken that everyone would ignore the item about St. John's, assuming the *Journal* ran it at all. Nor could he muster shock at latest attack, only bemusement at how readily citizens adjusted to a semblance of life in wartime.

Third local pipe bomb this month had destroyed the gondola shed under the footbridge at Waterplace Park. And with what result? Expensive boats were reduced to toothpicks, concrete bridge over the lazy Woonasquatucket had withstood the blast handsomely, and several minor casualties were receiving treatment for lacerations and tinnitus. The park was usually depopulated past mid-afternoon, based on enduring rep as a good place to get mugged, except on WaterFire nights, when too many suburbanites clogged streets and parking facilities.

Yes, the incident would wreak havoc with biweekly WaterFires, or Campfires on the Canal as Ira had it, when the gondoliers were busiest and stacks of hardwood in midstream rows of iron baskets went to blazes. City councilmen vowed on camera they'd approve special funds to rectify this cowardly act of terror. For prize tourist bait, Ira sourly observed, money always solidified up some magic sleeve, but termites were welcome to the 200-year-old wainscoting of historic landmarks.

So in whose manifesto was bombing gondolas an ideological goal? And with zero body count and no serious disruption? Previous sabotage had been equally random, stupid, and thus far untraceable, and Ira was happier than ever to be out of the Homeland Security loop. He was unclear whether the mayor had dubbed him Graffiti Czar as an honorific or a joke, and didn't care, content to rule his little roost of DPW loaners and two vanloads of cleaning equipment. Let more ambitious politicians risk fucking up where it actually mattered.

* * *

In windowless excuse for a corner office, Ira slogged through morning review of voicemail, with near-even ratio of complaints about graffiti and misdirected tirades about potholes. Between peevish messages, he overheard coworkers beyond his partitions react to yesterday's explosion. Their tone rapidly escalated from aghast to rabid, and he stopped listening when a proposal to summarily execute foreign agitators met with cheers.

He'd plead guilty to his fair share of heated discussions, talking trash, around the water cooler. But outright bloodlust like this—no, never! This new conversational norm made him cringe, as if people were losing their inhibitions, their judgment, like a milder version of the impulsiveness

behind cretinous trend to plant bombs. Or maybe he wasn't exempt from bad graces on the rise. Maybe he could have offered that Preservation Commission clown some pointers on using a power washer. It just hadn't occurred to him.

Then again, absurd targets were blowing up daily in cities worldwide, as if terrorism had been dumbed down, rendered apolitical. That should have been enough to put everyone on edge everywhere, despite most sanguine adjustments to "life in wartime." The mayhem hurdled national, cultural, and religious boundaries like wildfire over white picket fences, too scattershot to blame on copycats or any one organization.

Given the global situation, Ira was grateful for an HQ on the sidelines and off extremist radar, by Allens Avenue waterfront south of downtown, in a city hangar smelling of gasoline, rubber, and paint. This was particularly okay because a faint, embarrassing air of naphtha always clung to him, and he was more at ease in pungent surroundings than at City Hall, regardless of loud maintenance on sander and street-sweeping trucks.

Anyway, Ira couldn't wax too pessimistic at grisly headlines. Every generation since Plato's had proclaimed its officials most corrupt, its youth most irresponsible, its ideals most debased, its criminals most heinous. And how often have Jehovah's Witnesses alone had to revise their date for doomsday? No sooner does prophetic handwriting on the wall fade from sight and mind than it reappears, as if for the first time every time, Ira concluded.

He happened to be staring at the crappy linoleum, as if subjecting it to X-ray vision, probing into its past when dispatcher's or mechanic's station might have occupied this corner. The cracked and scuffed flooring was black, with haphazard off-white whorls and ripples like froth on a creek or cobwebs in a drafty cellar or gas clouds adrift in cosmic void. Yes, that was it. Such clouds, he'd heard somewhere, were the last gasp of defunct suns, or the first stirring of nascent suns, or both.

What the hell were they called? Simple English escaped him, even as the cracks and scuffmarks faded and a planetarium's illusion of depth surrounded him. He tried to wrap his head around the enormities of distance he'd have to travel to float within that starscape, the enormities of time in which dust became suns and then dust again. Somehow it didn't faze him to

dwell on light-years and eons, nor was it strange that these spans weren't intimidating. He felt at home, in fact, within this daydream of deep space.

After a vacant while, the ringing phone brought him down to earth. He reached for the receiver slowly, dreamily, as if under the spell of lingering weightlessness. At the mayor's voice he snapped to attention. His Honor ordered him to drop everything and skedaddle downtown to fix some goddamn graffiti on the Superman Building.

* * *

Superman Building was an utter misnomer, but who cared? Since Ira's boyhood at least, Rhode Islanders had cherished the myth of Art Deco skyscraper as model for one version or another of the *Daily Planet* offices, and nothing could disabuse them of it. Might as well try insisting "spa" didn't rhyme with "star." For eight decades, bigger and bigger banks had tenanted the state's tallest high-rise, till the biggest bank in America pulled out and left it like St. John's, derelict and ripe for demolition.

Tagger had scorned unchallenging street level and bas-relief frieze (for which he'd have needed a ladder) of city founder Roger Williams befriending Indians and securing a charter and other iconic highlights. Rather, he'd made straight for the tippy-top, abetted by B&E or human-fly skills, and was obviously the same artiste who'd profaned empty church, because along the entablature below cylindrical cupola was scrawled, "We are made of stars." Naturally the mayor was furious. The view of vandalism from his window would have hit him like a magenta slap in the face. Was that the artistic intent?

With leaden heart Ira grimaced upward, deaf to schoolkids and geezers milling around, waiting for buses in scruffy Kennedy Plaza. To undo this product of daring, stealth, and spray paint, Ira had to requisition scaffolding, safety harnesses, netting, and how the hell much else? The mayor would have to cut a lot of red tape, fast-track a lot of permits. Still, based on His Honor's displeasure, Ira was confident of men on the job by noon.

Mayoral ego they could salvage, sure, but the outlook for Superman Building was more doubtful. For Ira's money, graffiti on abandoned property always contained a subtext that solvent couldn't remove. It marked a place as unprotected, vulnerable, the brick-and-mortar equivalent of a

sick, lame critter ready to be culled from the herd. Sad it had to be the Superman Building, and the repetition of high-flown text irrelevant to the wall it marred was mystifying.

As expected, fully tricked-out Taskforce was soon hustling to the twenty-eighth floor, and by 4:30 the masonry was verbiage-free. Funny how fast the wheels of power spun when self-image was at stake. His Honor, of course, was home long before then, and would mayoral short-term memory extend to thanking Ira tomorrow? In any case, the cupboard in Ira's apartment was bare, so he scouted downtown for a menu within modest civil-servant budget.

He paused at the corner of seedy Washington and Mathewson Streets, leery of presenting a stationary target to panhandlers or worse. Wasn't some organic, local-ingredients eatery hereabouts? Down Mathewson, a mixed company of well-dressed thirty-somethings, with white collars or shiny necklaces, was filing through a doorway. That looked promising. The façade surrounding the doorway was of beige tiles with a sculpted row of blue cresting waves at tiptoe level, which Ira followed past the point of no return, to find himself gawking through picture window at a gallery opening, a.k.a. refreshments gratis. Why not?

The stoop was surfaced in black marble, as was the length of the foundation. It caught Ira's eye and induced brief vertigo. In the black were white veins, webbed and swirling like the linoleum in his cubicle, like the seething stellar gas whose glow wouldn't reach the earth for a million years. Steady there!

He wrenched his focus toward the unframed canvases beyond the glass. They only unsettled him further. The walls were like windows onto night skies, where stars clotted together as if between folded hands, or were strewn in irregular clusters, on the verge of resolving into patterns purely in the mind of the beholder maybe, like something by Jackson Pollock. These contorted heavens were somehow perverse, sinister, but mostly confounding because their exquisite stippling, their subtle infusions of red and blue and yellow, had been executed in spray paint. Ira would recognize that generally crude medium anywhere.

Refocusing on plate glass an inch from his nose depressurized him till he discovered upon it the press-type lettering "Signs of the Times" above an illegible signature in presumably water-soluble magenta. Were all scribbles

too alike to differentiate, or had he erased this one twice in as many days? Out the corner of his eye he glimpsed a pair of upscale hipsters smirking at him on their way in. He shut his gaping mouth and steeled himself. If the culprit was right here and Ira oafishly slunk away, he'd never live it down.

The space behind the glass amounted to an anteroom with a massive reception desk, or did bank of shallow drawers for artwork make it a storage unit where an attendant sat? Anyhow, upon it stood an artist's statement in a clear holder, and Ira skimmed as far as, "My true name is the unreadable name on my work. To reveal it would cede power to others, and moreover, the human larynx cannot pronounce it."

Yep, in each lower right corner was a unique miniature of the magenta squiggle, an insanely narrow-gauge use of the spray can, in keeping with that possibly calculated insanity of the artist's statement. Through square arch was a windowless inner sanctum with more paintings and, with any luck, wine and food.

First, though, title labels below each image might lend insights into the painter as madman, or better yet, as perp. Shuffling along, Ira crinkled despairing brow. "Pack Up Your Troubles"? "Everything Must Go"? "Game Over"? Names were as unrelated to compositions as graffiti had been to historic walls. "The Stars Are Soon Right"? Aha, connection with the subject matter at last, but as usual with modern art, Ira didn't get it.

"It Had to End Sometime." That arrested him, that threw him, as when a passing stranger snickered at his orthopedic Crocs. It had preternaturally singled him out, a rejoinder to earlier musings on the countless postponements of doomsday. He shrank from the label as if that were the same as disowning his outbreak of magical thinking.

Oops! How the hell had someone snuck up behind him, and he none the wiser? He recoiled from jarring contact, with the keenness of repulsion between like magnetic charges. "Sorry," he mumbled, and turned to meet emotional short-circuit. Part of him was shocked and part was too ready to confront yesterday's Bohemian from the parapet.

Had the Bohemian bowed more curtly, Ira would have mistaken it for a tic, and he grasped whose reception this was even without benefit of introduction. "An honor to be in the crosshairs of my specialty's most outspoken critic. Call me Ari, why don't you?"

Ira's mental short-circuit sputtered on. How much, if anything, had this Ari just admitted, if that was his birth name? Ira fumbled for words like a skydiver for a misplaced ripcord. "What do you know about that graffiti you saw me erase?"

"I know it was unimportant once it served its purpose." As Ari shifted his blasé weight from right foot to left, tight leather pants squeaked. Ira hated leather pants. "I know you shouldn't fritter away the time we have left."

Jesus, what to address first, the graffiti's "purpose" or "the time we have left"? Ira was still foundering when a plump girl with armloads of jangly bracelets and blue streaks in blond dreadlocks steered the exhibitor away by the puffy sleeve, whispering about a buyer. She betrayed no awareness Ira existed.

Stress was loosing that musk of naphtha from his pores, wasn't it? No wonder gallery girl had shunned him. He'd learn no more tonight about tentative suspect. This had been a far cry from his scene, his comfort zone, for decades. Best to steal away, before he attracted further demoralizing smirks.

On the sidewalk, he glanced up repeatedly en route to his Civic. Providence was city enough that its skyglow made for mediocre stargazing. Big Dipper, Scorpio, Orion's Belt, anyhow, looked no different, to his great relief. Had he really doubted they would? And remarkably, sense of kinship with smug painter had also endured, though morphing into sibling envy that yearned to put parallel self behind bars.

* * *

Ira lost track of how many days plodded by without local disturbance. But they offered no respite. Spirits didn't rebound, no hopes for lasting calm brightened, definitely not for Ira, and how could he be atypical? Nope, more mayhem had to be brewing, and the longer it held off, the tenser the citywide atmosphere grew. In others, moreover, Ira discerned unseemly, ill-harnessed anticipation, as if they were secretly eager for smoke and explosions, a circus, a festival of calamity. Disappointment lurked under new workplace greeting, "Well, no bombs yet."

Ira deplored this ghoulish hankering, crediting strength of character for exempting him from it. Yes, for weeks he'd had crazy dreams, but how was he responsible for those? Actually they'd have qualified as nightmares, except he woke energized, elated, like Scrooge on Christmas morning. But upbeat mood wasn't his fault either, was it?

In fact, they only chafed because he couldn't decipher the remembered chaos so lucid to his dreaming self. Ari's jagged signature across chrome gate the width of a canyon had been perfectly legible, and Ira had blithely pronounced its chittering syllables. He was basking in the nuclear fusion at the heart of a sun, in teeming red bursts and eddies and vortices, and he beheld in it a parity with rioting mobs packed into malls and town squares, looting and torching and butchering, and both the solar furnace and the carnage filled his ecstatic regard as if he were in two places at once. The act of looking up had thrust him into black space among white maelstroms of gas broader than any planetary system, and had reminded him that everything material spent more eons inchoate than otherwise, that such was everything's true and normal state, and squinting, he could comprehend the age of each atom as handily as reading a clock. But come morning, alarm clock dispelled any remnants of epiphany, demoting him to sad sack who'd absorbed too many bad vibes from the zeitgeist.

* * *

The mayor had convened a review session of everyone in charge of anything at Public Works, and glowing self-reports droned on as excruciatingly as shadow crept over brick wall across the way from stuffy Victorian council chamber. Rush-hour traffic had all ebbed away before a blue-haired secretary barged in and practically brayed, "Bomb scare at the Arcade! Bomb squad's there now! Chief of Police and Public Safety Commissioner both called and said tell the mayor immediately!"

Meeting adjourned, before Ira could enlarge upon promising efforts to nab the graffitist His Honor most wanted to rot in jail. Stampede swept disapproving Ira along, involuntarily excited as if by osmosis, among seasoned bureaucrats no classier than hungry paparazzi chasing some poor celebrity. The Arcade was a minute's trot from City Hall, but intervening

taller structures prevented it from sticking like derisive finger in mayoral eye.

Here was another venerable landmark, its survival till impending two-hundredth birthday in question, a veritable temple of commerce with Ionic colonnades and proportions from the heyday of Greek Revival. Touted as the first roofed shopping mall ever, it had ridden out economic crests and troughs galore until current owner evicted its small-scale retailers to install a single major player, who promptly reneged during the mortgage crisis. For years the mice had had three stories of boutique floorspace to themselves.

Used to be, Ira mused, that prospects of lethal blast and dismemberment and rocketing shrapnel would have frightened the public off. Now, however, his colleagues' bluster and elite rank couldn't even leverage them up to the police cordon, through crowd thicker than pigeons around a hill of crumbs. Thrill-junkies had flocked from college dorms and repertory theatres and barstools, ditching nightlife culture in the dust. Not that city fathers were setting a more dignified example.

Nobody pushed or jostled. Rather, as if by psychic consensus, everyone strained forward en masse, to exert constant, fatiguing pressure on police line, like a starfish on a clamshell, ignoring orders to disperse without specific misconduct to provoke nightstick reprisal. Bomb-squad armored van was parked on slate sidewalk between cops and Arcade steps, and the crew was somewhere indoors. Nothing to see, actually, apart from the crowd itself, and in isosceles triangle below the roofline, the magenta script "The Stars Are," stopping short of forlorn Xmas star made of light bulbs at the base of the triangle.

Hey, that was half of a title from Ari's exhibit! Ira drew exultant breath. He had wily vandal dead to rights, never mind how unwily Ari had been to recycle telltale phrase. What's more, the foretaste of guilt-by-association was delicious. Maybe bomb prep had taken Ari so long that police arrived before he could finish tagging.

Logic dictated Ari was already miles from the scene of the crime. Too bad! Ira indulged backward once-over just as streetlamps sank incandescent shafts into the dark, and for once wishful thinking was rewarded by sudden spotlight on Ari, cattycorner in the forecourt of an '80s pink granite office tower. With a nonchalance as if he'd practiced at a mirror, as if his eyes

hadn't met Ira's, he about-faced and ambled through the revolving doors into the tower's glass-encased lobby.

Briefly Ira spaced out as he would while watching a seahorse in an aquarium. Then he charged off, without alerting his colleagues, who'd joined relentless mob, or the cops, in no position to assist. He darted through the revolving doors, raised an eyebrow at absence of night guard from receptionist's island in the middle of capacious lobby, and detected Ira on the black rubber ramp to the revolving doors on the other side of the block. Green rucksack with pair of oblong red reflectors sewn into the flap must have functioned as vandal's paintbox.

Ira padded along, a casual stone's throw between them, grateful for de facto tracking device that bobbed away like red eyes of a playful monster skipping backward. Soon, he rejoiced, he'd be phoning police from outside Ari's home or atelier or next site of misdemeanor in progress. Ira trailed him past Superman Building, across nocturnal sideshow of Kennedy Plaza, up more and more desolate streets beside the glass-and-girder impersonality of Westin Hotel, Convention Center, the coarsely christened Dunkin' Donuts Arena.

Red-eyed monster was much less worrisome than the foot traffic. There was an awful lot of it, and it only increased dramatically after he and Ari crossed the bridge over Route 95 and headed up Broadway. Lowlife or cleancut, cool or conservative, male or female, pedestrians stalked around with hard, feverish expressions as if out looking for someone to start something and for no other reason, not that this avenue of padlocked cafés, funeral homes, and rundown Victorian mansions provided reasons.

Everyone's bearing was jittery, loose-jointed, as if they had trouble containing themselves. What had gotten into people? Did they even question why they were rambling under the stars? Was tonight a full moon? Ira narrowed his gaze solely onto Ari's backpack and every so often repressed an urge to bawl, "Where the hell are we going?" Ari was as keen on the way forward as Ira, never glancing aside or behind. Nothing in his behavior let on he knew Ira was tailing him.

Ira had to weigh the dismal possibility he was in the thrall of a cheeky, solipsistic Pied Piper, a story that never ended well. Simultaneously, to break off pursuit would leave him alone in the thick of maladjusted, hostile humanity, as if Ari at close range conferred safe passage.

A knot twisted in Ira's stomach as Ari entered Broadway's final downhill stretch. Yes, they were bound for Olneyville, Ira's least beloved neighborhood, scuzzy, congested, post-industrial bottomland where bottom-feeder shops and businesses and the city's social dregs collected. He was aware of how that sounded, but dammit, who could accuse Ira of snobbery when it was the plain truth? And ironically, though downtown touted itself as the Arts District, substantially more artists resorted to the gutted mills and warehouses of Olneyville for low-rent lofts and studios.

In the basin dubbed Olneyville Square (though it was more an unruly intersection), the locals were at their most reckless, most agitated, in such scofflaw numbers that cars weren't getting through, the net effect resembling a restive carnival midway. He overheard plenty of angry muttering, but saw no conversations. Praise the Lord, Ari veered left before gathering riot entrapped them. Ira memorized the name of the side street and debated whether he'd ever been here, had dined at a rib joint around that hairpin bend, shit, it would have been thirty years ago.

But then, forget the rib joint, every sensory input engaging his consciousness began to resonate as if with *déjà vu*, or with the echo of someone else perceiving likewise. It felt like a nitrous oxide high, and maybe the someone else was Ari, halfway through parking lot of rehabbed multistory factory. Most of the windows, shaped like those tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, were lit and filtering giddy cocktail chatter, lapping like sonic waves out to the sidewalk. Ira shook his head vigorously and cleared it for the moment. Wow, tough day was taking its toll on his pragmatic brain, or was he hyperventilating after crosstown hike?

Squatting behind a minivan in the parking lot, he freed his cell from vest pocket of City Hall go-to-meeting suit and had 911 connect him with West Side precinct house. Two dozen exasperating rings later, he rattled off his name and title and the street and the name of the "arts complex" on plywood sign above the dark arch of the entrance. Inside, he announced, was a graffitist the mayor avidly wished to nail, and possibly the Arcade bomber as well.

The desk sergeant seemed inappropriately lightheaded and cavalier when terrorism and Mayoral priorities were involved. They were kinda shorthanded at present, he hedged, but he'd try sending a car, and what was the address again? "Okey-dokey," he signed off.

“Okey-dokey?” grumbled Ira at dead phone.

Ari must have gone in by now. Ira scurried to the murky archway, seeking some directory of tenants with Ari therein, or even his true name’s unpronounceable zigzags. Instead he found Ari, taking snide, minute bow and heaving open gray steel door. Ira rationalized he wasn’t more startled because he’d grown used to Ari’s unpredictability.

“That bomb in the Arcade was none of my doing,” Ari greeted him. “In fact, I tipped off authorities when I noticed the break-in while going about my business. I refuse to be upstaged by anything rudimentary as fertilizer and brass tubing, though in light of quick police response, that’s exactly what happened.” He beckoned Ira brusquely inside. “You’ll be safer accepting my hospitality.”

Ira was at a loss for what to believe. He would, however, most likely feel safer behind even this miscreant’s locked door. In short order, cocktail chitchat suffusing night air had devolved into the uproar of a building-wide drinking game. Ira ducked on ahead, tempted to perform a snippy little bow of his own, but why lower himself to Ari’s level?

First-floor offices behind frosted-glass windows were dim and silent. Ceiling fluorescents shone dull on worn varnish of floorboards rife with gummy black spots and oily streaks, and Ira could have sworn the lighting pulsed in sync with the ebb and flow of raucous celebrants. At the end of the corridor were stairs and a freight elevator. Nary a soul had sprung from the woodwork yet, for which Ira was profoundly thankful.

Was accompanying impulsive Ari into confined quarters a wise idea? Ira’s line of sight tarried on the bottom steps till Ari cleared his throat. “I’m four flights up. Odds are better of running into people on the stairs than in the elevator.” Ira nodded haplessly.

Ari bent at the knees to yank elevator door up by a strip of burlap trailing in the dust. He slid aside the inner folding gate. Ira meekly preceded him into the cage and prematurely fretted over whether he’d exit through forward or rear door. Snap out of it, man! Ira had to regain some control before he degenerated into blubbering putty. He hit mental rewind of memories about Ari, stopped indiscriminately. “Do you really think your vandalism will save historic landmarks by publicizing their sorry condition?”

Tarnished brass plaque on the wall sported a big red button labeled “Up” and a big black button labeled “Down.” The frame for the inspector’s certificate was empty. Ari pressed his thumb against red button and held it there, and shook his head as if Ira were a slow child incredulous about the birds and bees. “We’re in 100% agreement that graffiti spells a property’s doom.”

When the hell had Ira told him that? Or was it like Ari’s “Had to End Sometime” title as clairvoyant rejoinder to Ira’s private musings?

“And I’ve used innocuous spray paint to hasten the destruction, rather than risk lives with messy explosions.”

“But why do you want these places torn down?” Furthermore, how long did this rattletrap need to go up four stories?

“Till quite recently I took for granted a morality that informed great art, an ethical code for artists. Then the dreams convinced me otherwise, and I realized abetting the inevitable would lessen the general suffering.”

“But what is it that’s inevitable, and what does flattening old buildings have to do with it?” Ira also puzzled at his poor judgment in decamping from the parking lot, since the cops, assuming they ever showed, would be clueless without him.

“You would know our inevitable end, you would know everything I do, if you let yourself.” Ira was half listening, half diverted by his blossoming bouquet of naphtha, automatically concerned he was offending Ari. No revulsion was evident. “Too many factors are contributing to that end for me to summarize. But would you like to discuss the one in which we’ve played roles?”

Grinding, squealing gears in the elevator shaft shook the cage and made Ira wince, which Ari interpreted as yes. “Obviously, ‘old buildings’ are a tangible part of our history, our cultural memory. Destroy enough, forget enough of the past, replace its traces in enough skulls with the ephemera of today minus all yesteryears, the collective psyche reaches a tipping point, as when infections from separate wounds stage a coup together. Ours then becomes a species deprived of history, mere consumers, like germs in a Petri dish, devoid of purpose or perspective, often in the name, ironically, of progress. And this is good, this merits expediting.”

“This is good?” Ira’s weak echo died as the car shuddered and groaned to a standstill.

Ari lectured on, as if oblivious to stoppage. “It’s good because it’s inevitable, it’s the reality of the universe in naked glory, the state in which we’ll be beyond good and evil, reveling and merging in a holocaust of ecstasy. Dreams have taught me this, and those like you who’ve had the dreams but learned or remembered nothing of them, they still awaken your atavistic selves to foment havoc or hatred.”

Could blithering Ari still relate to the here and now? “Are we going to be stuck here for long?”

Ari frowned again as if Ira were a pitifully slow child. “It stalls like that sometimes.” His thumb released the red button. “Let’s retry our luck later.” Ari was obnoxiously unfazed. “Ever occur to you that elevator factories are always in one-story buildings? What kind of confidence does that instill?” Ari had to grin for the two of them.

No sooner had ratchety elevator motor gone silent than the bedlam of merrymakers rushed in to plug the vacuum. Between the laughter, banging, shrieks, and breaking glass, the residents were already too ecstatic for Ira’s taste. Overbearing racket crimped the wail of approaching sirens into the whine of mosquitoes.

Pragmatic Ira was frantic to debunk this whole evening as an elaborate hoax, a joke, a montage of delusion and coincidence. However, calm and clarity from interior parts unknown assured him his doors of perception required no cleansing. From out of that same uncharted depth reverberated Ari’s soliloquy, a syllable ahead of its delivery aloud, like the pre-echo of first notes on Dad’s LPs, further proof of the empathic party line he and Ari shared.

He shied from buying altogether into Ari’s endgame madness, but something untoward, something surreal was occurring. As a pragmatist he had to acknowledge sober sensory input. And before pandemonium worsened, he had ledgers to balance, dots to connect. “Ari, you underestimate me. This anarchy erupting around us, I remember it from dreams as well as you do. But since I’m such an ignoramus, please, why is that anarchy mixed up in my dreams with feeling euphoric inside the sun and floating in dust clouds a million light years away?”

“Apologies if I’ve misjudged you.” Again with the minimal bow. “But to my credit, I distinguished in you a kindred spirit, the fellow beneficiary of an inborn gift.” Ari paused as thundering feet and concerted jabbering from

somewhere below set the latticework gate to vibrating gently. “We’re privileged to observe these preliminaries without engulfment in them. Genetics or more obscure agency has made us brothers in that respect.”

Ari and Ira flinched in unison as a flurry of gunshots prompted a spike in the caterwauling, and then a bated hush, and then shriller caterwauling and muffled pounding. Cops in the maelstrom, as per Ira’s 911 call? Cops bluntly neutralized? With their blood, and that of their marksmanship, on Ira’s hands?

Ari shrugged off his backpack, dangled it by the straps on his forearm. “The rioters, the heart of the sun, the stardust, they are all one. That was the lesson of your dreams, decoded from every cell in your body, had you only been receptive to it. You should have become an artist. Knowledge doesn’t always come of logical processes. Or do revelations belong in the same mythic ghetto as Bigfoot and chupacabra?”

While awaiting tongue-tied Ira’s reply, Ari lowered backpack to floor and fumbled in it, and then the dingy bulb in the ceiling went out. In the treacherous dark, Ira went rigid like a panic-struck pillar of naphtha, but then, light from a battery lantern next to the backpack tainted the cage wan blue, as if Ari had foreseen this blackout.

That question on revelations must have been rhetorical, for he forged on. “If you’d cultivated a less earthbound disposition, you’d have remembered the sounds of my true name engraved on the chrome gate, you’d have remembered how to write it, and you’d have fathomed it’s your true name as well, just as it’s everybody’s true name.”

Ari paused as if forewarned again. Thud! Ira managed to embrace the white lie that a bushel sack of potatoes had slammed into the elevator roof and rocked the cage, in the seconds before a dribble, brownish in the blue light, seeped through the seam around ceiling emergency hatch and pattered onto the floor between them. Ari went on as if such distractions were beneath him, or simply weren’t getting past his manic effulgence.

“A more intrepid will than yours would have bypassed the chrome gate and deduced from tableaux and inscriptions on geometrically indecent monuments the glory of those who flourished before our stars, our sun, occupied the sky. You’d have understood that our predecessors can only reclaim bodily existence when the stars are right, those stars that were their

stars, which decomposed into dust, into atoms of elements that became our sun, our planets, ourselves.”

With a clinical detachment in itself probably symptomatic of mental breakdown, Ira noted a readiness to take Ari at his word, as if he were professing nothing deranged, just as Ira’s reaction to blood from the ceiling was limited to a desire to sidestep the widening pool. No dice! His vexing bouquet had vanished, he was no longer a pillar of naphtha, but his feet were stuck fast.

“In other words, we are the stars, and now we are right, and in a position to restore the primeval majesty of one who has bided inert and diminished, a relic of his former omnipotence. This is our destiny, to revivify a lord of previous creation, to commune with what we were ten billion years ago.”

Initially Ira blamed bleak lantern glow for Ari’s greenish complexion, but it overtaxed coincidence that at the same instant he perceived Ari had gone mute, flapping his lips like a stranded fish, or else Ira had gone deaf, for he couldn’t hear the orgiastic din either. His nose, meanwhile, still functioned, and in lieu of naphtha was the burgeoning stench from a barrel of rotten shrimp. It didn’t bother him, though, any more than the blood on his shoes did, and really, it was something to savor.

And now sea-green Ari was calmly, languidly sloughing off human outline and melting out of his clothes, and Ira yearned to liquefy more quickly and coalesce with Ari and flow from the elevator toward the others, and it didn’t hurt, without pain receptors it couldn’t, those must have been among the first mortal attributes to go. Instead, his disembodiment felt liberating, empowering, and especially natural.

Best of all about becoming one drop in this rising sea, one piece in this global puzzle, he could envision the totality, as if a jigsaw piece could see the finished picture. His interactions with Ari, everybody’s interactions the world over, had always been jigsaw pieces too, building up to this moment, and as history ended and eternal now began, he saw with another’s eyes, and with dwindling selfhood, that he would be augmenting the girth of a mountain, a mountain he brought more fully to life by melding with it, a mountain that would live forever and tread among the stars and among the stars that would succeed them. The sound of his true name no longer posed a mystery, except no human mouth could properly pronounce it, and he had no mouth whatsoever.

Trophy

MELANIE TEM

Melanie Tem's work has received the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, British Fantasy, and World Fantasy Awards and a nomination for the Shirley Jackson Award. She published numerous short stories, eleven solo novels, two collaborative novels with Nancy Holder, and two with her husband Steve Rasnic Tem. She was also a published poet, an oral storyteller, and a playwright. In Concert, a collaborative short story collection with Steve Rasnic Tem, was published in August 2010, and solo stories have recently appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Crimewave, and Interzone, and in anthologies such as The Devil's Coattails and the Black Wings series. Her novels Yellow Wood and Proxy were published by ChiZine in 2014 and 2015. Melanie was a social worker and non-profit executive director. She died on February 9, 2015. She is survived by her husband, four children, and four granddaughters.

LEG AND STUMP AKIMBO, BARE KNEE WEDGED against the side of the dry bathtub, neck at an uncomfortable angle, limp mutilated penis as ready as he knew how to make it for the unimaginable event that possessed his imagination, Nolan waited. He'd been pregnant a long time. Tonight was the night.

Last Thursday had been going to be the night, too, and a particular Fourth of July, and more than one anniversary of his accident. But he'd been wrong all those times, screwed up the calculations, or just been dumb or crazy. Or they'd tricked him. They liked to trick him, for reasons of their own, like sending him full-on down the slope into that tree with his legs wide apart. Once he'd realized that had been their doing, it had made more sense.

He didn't think he was wrong this time, though. They were still tricking him, but not about this—or, if they were, the trickiest part of the trick was that he had no way of knowing. Waiting in the flimsy shower stall of his flimsy apartment, he watched YouTube videos and played games and sang love songs. The songs were prayers. The games and videos—hands and legs and heads blown off, eyes gouged out, hearts run through—helped him pass the time while the alien child grew inside him. Grew and grew.

Nolan had no idea how long the gestation period would be. He didn't really know when or how they'd knocked him up; his best guess was that it had happened on that last long beautiful run, but he couldn't quite figure out the mechanics. All he could do was wait, be ready. If you could ever be ready for something like this. If you could ever be ready for anything.

Usually he liked to start out with the animal ones and move up from there. Trying to obey orders not to change his position in the tub, Nolan pressed the Start button for the app. On the screen, close to his own face, so close he felt the breath, tasted the blood and snot and what was probably brain, the cute head of a rabbit exploded. Then a beautiful long-winged bird in flight, feathers flying, belly dropping gore. Then a spectacular eight-point buck, bloody hole opening in its chest, trophy head left intact. Then an elephant with knowing eyes.

Holding the phone made his fingers spasm. The back of his cut-off knee itched. Cramps flared in the foot that had been gone since the crash. The

flesh of the missing thigh and hip was tingling and sweating. In the crater left when the doctors had dug out his smashed scrotum, pain and pleasure swelled the balls that weren't there.

Sometimes Nolan enjoyed the discomfort of using his hand to work the controls. Tonight he thought he'd prefer the strain of using the mouthstick. He pursed his lips and wiggled his tongue, as if for the kiss he used to waste time wishing for. If his body still worked the way it had been made to, life would be a lot easier, but maybe not as sexy.

As he moved on to the human videos, something moved in his belly. He caught his breath, still afraid to think about where the baby would emerge from his body, afraid because it would be so good and it would hurt so much and it would probably kill him. That's what they'd promised, if he'd understood right. It was hard to understand aliens. Nolan didn't dare let himself think he might have misunderstood.

In the too-narrow bathtub, he cocked his knee up next to his shoulder like an insect leg that could be pulled off with a quick flick. He cupped his penis and stroked it with just the tips of his thumb and forefinger while the villagers were shot, bayoneted, raped, hacked. Blood sprayed and gusted. Nolan didn't come, of course, but the not-coming felt good in a miserable sort of way. Zooms showed off the terror in a young woman's eyes, the sorrow in the body of a really old man. Nolan could name "terror," "sorrow," "despair," "anguish," and he'd taught himself which worked best for his pleasure, but he couldn't be expected to know what would please aliens. A little boy's round tear-streaked face hung on the screen for a nice long moment before it was blown apart.

The child inside him kicked, or did some alien thing that resembled kicking. Nolan arched his back as much as he could. He couldn't picture what part of the baby alien's body was beating up on him from the inside, and he couldn't translate the rhythm. Was it a message? Did it mean something about the alien's birth and his own death? Eventually it just stopped.

The face on the screen now was so close-up he couldn't tell age or gender or race or condition or expression. There were no visible wounds. Nolan bulged his eyes, chilled when they almost touched the other bulging eyes. He kissed the gaping mouth with his own. Bombs and people screamed. Nice.

The stick wasn't totally under his control, so the thrill when it connected with the NEXT button was always about both skill and luck. This time severed appendages flew toward him, trailing strings and chunks. The phantom effect in his excised body parts was excellent. So was the buzz of knowing that somebody had spent all that time and energy creating this great video and that other people might be watching it at this same exact second. Not all of them were waiting to give birth to an alien child, though; in fact, Nolan might be the only one in this world. A hand flung itself at him and he could have sworn stroked his cheek on its way down into the battlefield mire. Gory flames filled the screen.

Good one. But over too fast. Nolan was nowhere near finished, and nothing was happening with the pregnancy except that his belly seemed a little fuller, tauter. A pleasantly unpleasant ache spread all across his lower abdomen, between his leg and stump, through his squashed dick. Or all in his mind. Whatever.

That desperate night when the first video had appeared on his screen, gaudy logo and garish trumpets and drums, personalized "Nolan" and with his log-in already set up, he'd assumed he'd screwed up somehow, uploaded it by accident. Precision was not his strong point. Then he'd thought some goon or goonette must have been messing with his phone, even though he almost always had it with him and his sleep was never what you'd call sound, even with all the drugs. Only later did the realization come to him that the devilish aliens had set all this up for him—or, more likely, for their own sick fun.

The Start button had been easy to find and responded right away to his unsteady touch. His own image had popped up, full-screen and nude, up close and displayed in amazing high resolution. When could that have been taken? They must have been in the apartment somehow without him knowing it. The very blue eyes of onscreen Nolan had met and locked with the very blue eyes of Nolan who watched. The scars on his chest and belly, throat and forehead, had throbbed as those on the screen glistened. The leg stump and the destroyed and sort of rebuilt crotch had rushed forward to slap him in the face. The two Nolans had kissed.

And the rest, he thought, is history. But it's not over yet.

He was poking around for the Enhanced Interrogations button when Goon came in and stood over him, probably looking at the screen. Probably

getting off on it himself. Most of them didn't admit to that; sometimes Nolan was aware of their wetness or hard-ons. Most of them barely spoke to him. The only thing they had in common with him was their job, which they hated and needed and wouldn't have if it wasn't for him being the way he was, meaning they also hated and needed him and his unnatural, ruined body. And they didn't even know that it was also temporarily inhabited by another life form.

This Goon liked to chat about how disgusting Nolan's various porn was, why would you fill your head with something like that when you could fill it with thoughts of God? War porn was the work of the Devil. Car crash and dead-baby scenarios were the work of the Devil. Hunting animals was one thing, especially if you ate the meat, but getting off on the kill was the work of the Devil. Nolan's accident had been the work of the Devil, claiming him because he'd strayed. "God doesn't intend for us to live in this world the way you do," he explained again now, dripping kindness and reasonableness while he ogled the screen. "God didn't make you like this, buddy. The devil made you."

Nolan spat out the stick and the word "Cool," just to mess with him. Goon knuckled him on the back of the head. He heard it through his skull. Goon told him that Satan had taken over his mouth and soul and he had to cast Him out. Nolan laughed at how close to being right Goon was, and how completely wrong. Goon rapped him again and left the room.

Nolan didn't always know if he believed in anything other than the alien inside him and the onscreen images and the vivid physical sensations his distorted body couldn't possibly be feeling. But if he did, and if he cast out his Maker and Ally, what would that leave him with? He'd understood that he'd never have anything else since the moment he'd spread his legs for the mirror and stared full-frontal at what the jet skis and the surgeons had done, that tree the last thing he would ever embrace.

Tonguing the mouthstick to scroll through his Mutilated Corpse favorites list, he settled on "Whores" and, within that, "Lulu." The first slash, to cut off the left boob, went a little too fast and Lulu's begging was sort of blurry, but after that the rhythm was good, the visuals awesome.

"You are one sick puppy," Goon declared from behind and above him. So he hadn't left the room after all, or he'd sneaked back in to spy. He was tall, loud. "Get out of the damn tub. This is totally stupid."

“No! I can’t! I have to—” But it didn’t matter what he said. Goon pulled him up and out of the place where he was supposed to wait and jerked clothes onto him and crammed him into the chair and stuck him in the bedroom. He didn’t take the phone away this time, though, and Nolan managed to get another video up, a young soldier burning alive, then burning dead. The screams were outstanding, shrill and then hoarse and then guttural and then silenced. The odor was a nice touch; good thing the aliens were advanced, and good thing they had sort of the same tastes he did. It occurred to him now for the first time that, in addition to having chosen him for the birth, they might be using him to let them feel human eroticism. He smiled. When it was over—not before—Goon gagged and left the room shouting his own kind of prayers.

Then Nolan worked on the game he would invent if he had the technical knowledge and the physical skills. And the time; he didn’t think he’d have time before the birth, but he didn’t know for sure. All in his head, it was as real as anything.

This Goon had been working for him long enough now that Nolan knew what his avatar would be like: broad shoulders, rough hands, bulldog voice. Piercing him with dozens of poison arrows might be fun, or putting a bomb in his underwear. Nolan stopped to think for a while. Maybe the aliens would send him a message about that.

Even the best scenarios started to get stale after only a few times through. Wistfully, restlessly, Nolan moved on to another of his favorites, the Pillaged Village, which had the nice feature of letting you pick either the viewpoint of the gang of rapists or of somebody getting gang-raped. For a while he was stuck in a delicious mental paralysis because either choice might pleasure and relieve him and either might fall flat.

This evening neither identity did much for him. He watched again and again, adjusting the effects—bigger cock, sharper or blunter broken bottle, longer iron rod; younger/older perps and victim; different values on a drop-down scale amusingly labeled “degrees of virginity.” Nothing.

Not enough build-up would make him feel cheated for days afterward. Too much was so frustrating he often couldn’t get there at all, as if his body got tired of waiting and gave up, as if everything was just too much effort.

Everything was too much effort. But that was his life. This was the body he’d been dealt—by his own adolescent stupidity, by the macho

recklessness of his buddy who'd come to see him once in rehab and spent the whole time chatting about how that run had been the best ever. By Whomever had set the whole thing up, whose identity Nolan was now pretty sure of.

Sometimes after all these years—talk about the work of the Devil—he was visited by dreams of being touched by somebody who loved him, at least got that he was a person, not just by the paid, hurried hands and eyes of Goons and Goonettes that he couldn't always tell were straying into places in his body or in his apartment where they hadn't been invited. A lot of the time it was hard to tell whether these dreams were sleeping or waking, and the distinction was meaningless anyway. He might welcome or dread them; there wasn't a lot of difference.

It would be stupid to say he couldn't stand it. You could stand just about anything. He had, after all, been able to stand that first look in the mirror at the mess of his crotch: prepared for, built up to piece-by-piece with examinations of the other damage, staged behind the closed door of his childhood bedroom he'd returned to because there was nowhere else to go. Unable on his own to spread what was left of his legs, he'd made his father do it, and Dad had been shaking and choked up before Nolan had glimpsed and then stared at the raw new stitched-up hole.

"Look what they did!" The words had been almost incomprehensible, even to him, but the wail had been clear. "Look what they did to me!" hating the doctors, hating the buddy, hating the sound of his mother's moans and retches in the bathroom and how the next thing his father did was cover him up. Hating what back then he'd thought of as God, Whose Plan this was for him. But standing it all, coming to some kind of terms. And then getting the message that he was carrying an alien child and would someday, somehow, bring it into this world, meaning he was chosen and doomed.

The frustration was bad tonight. Everything he could feel about his body, and a lot he couldn't really feel, was pulsing, shuddering, and shattering, afire. He knew that was a trick, an effect. His body, already shattered years and years earlier, couldn't move enough to shudder or pulse. The burning was phantom. Only the images on the tiny screen were real. And the sudden particular cramping in his belly, and the entities behind it all.

Nolan held his breath and waited. Another cramp bent him over. His heart was pounding and he was wet with sweat. This could be the first pangs of the birth. Or not, but he couldn't risk missing it.

He called and pushed the buzzer and banged on his chair for Goon to come and get his clothes off and put him back in the tub where he was supposed to be. Goon was probably busy jerking off, or stealing Nolan's food, or snoring on Nolan's couch. Or he wasn't here at all. Whenever this happened, Nolan was attacked by terror that he'd been left alone. They did it on purpose just to devil him. It gave him some sort of weird comfort to remind himself that he was in fact alone, even when one of the Goons or Goonettes was here, alone and waiting for the one real experience left to him.

But in order for that experience to happen he had to get to the designated birth place. What would happen if he wasn't there when the baby alien was ready to come out was not in his power to know, but it wouldn't be good. When he pressed the buzzer attached to the chair arm, he didn't feel or hear anything, and nobody came. The hollow in the deep middle of his body was stretching and tearing. He called out, a phlegmy roar. There was no sign of anyone to help him, and he couldn't wait.

He managed to slide himself out of the chair onto the floor. Pain radiated through the body parts that were still there and those that weren't. He hoped he hadn't hurt the baby. He was maneuvering toward the door between the bedroom and bathroom with the phone in his shirt pocket and the stylus in his teeth when somebody crooned, "Hello, Nolan."

Who was that? Usually the service at least gave him a heads-up about a new attendant. The sound he made came out a squeal.

"Nice to finally meet you in person."

Since Nolan's body wouldn't twist or turn or lean very much, his field of vision was limited, and this idiot was outside it. They were supposed to get training about stuff like that. They were supposed to announce their presence, not sneak up on him, and they were supposed to stay where he could see them, and tell their names, or some name for him to call them by. He didn't care about the name thing; they were all just Goonette or Goon. This voice could be male or female or trans. Not that it mattered; Nolan barely thought of himself as one gender or another, let alone anybody else.

Goonette said, over-the-top friendly, “How can I help you, Nolan?” and loomed somewhere over him in a cloud of strange body heat and odor, and growled “Ah” as if thick pleasure had been brought up in her/his throat.

“Tub.”

He was working up to saying more words, to increase the minimal chances of being understood, when Goonette spoke for him. Nolan hated when people did that because they were almost always wrong. But Goonette said, “You want to get back in the tub so the baby can be born.”

Bunched up on the floor, he nodded. Everything inside him was very still, except for the familiar alien movements of the baby.

Goonette’s long strong arms embraced Nolan from behind, something like a heart beating into Nolan’s back, chin-like protrusion pressing into the top of Nolan’s head. The hands felt up Nolan’s thighs and crotch before one of them got to the phone and pulled it out of the pocket. His motions and noises of protest might have been made in the silence of outer space for all the effect they had.

Balancing him in what felt like several arms, Goonette used several appendages to strip him. Also to caress him: “You like that, Nolan? That feel good?” Then he was not exactly carried but transported and deposited in the bathtub, leg and stump arranged. The pain was slicing and gouging now, not in any one place but from all angles.

What must be Goonette was hovering over him. He couldn’t make out much detail except the light of his phone camera and a long pliant glean that rushed toward his crotch and into it, digging and tearing. Pleasure and agony peaked and something enormous broke out of him, making an alien noise.

“Good one,” he heard Goonette chortle. “Better than any of the rest. They’ll love this at home. Nolan, we will make you a star.”

Contact

JOHN PELAN AND STEPHEN MARK RAINEY

Author, editor, and publisher John Pelan works as an editor for Centipede Press and Ramble House Publishers. While he will protest that he isn't really a Mythos writer, the lure of Cthulhu and kin seems to draw him back on regular occasions. John and his wife Kathy retired to Gallup, New Mexico, after decades of living in the Pacific Northwest.

Stephen Mark Rainey is the author of the novels Dreams of the Dark (with Elizabeth Massie; HarperEntertainment, 1999), Balak (Wildside Press, 2000), The Lebo Coven (Five Star, 2004), The Nightmare Frontier (Sarob Press, 2006), Blue Devil Island (Five Star, 2007), and The Monarchs (Crossroad Press, 2013), more than 90 published works of short fiction, five short story collections, and several audio dramas for Big Finish Productions based on the Dark Shadows TV series. For ten years, he edited the award-winning magazine Deathrealm and has edited anthologies for Chaosium, Arkham House, and Delirium Books. Mark lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.

AT FIRST I DID NOT WANT TO GO. THE PAY WAS ALL one could hope for, but the long trip in stasis, where one is at the mercy of any mechanical failure, was itself enough to dissuade most people. Who could forget the return of the *Mehitobel* and her cargo of corpses? The ship had done its job, of course; the fact that the life-support units had burned out, leaving sixty people to die in stasis and quietly rot, was not the fault of the navigational program. The ship had reached Pluto and patiently waited for the crew to finish excavating a load of eganinium and return to Earth. But the crew had never broached the frozen surface or even left the ship. They had died before mining a single ounce of that most precious element.

However, money speaks volumes when one's investments have fallen short of expectations, so I went. And the journey to that icy rock some five billion miles distant was successful—inasmuch as our life-support units operated flawlessly for the duration. However, we went with a crew barely half the size of the former ship's. "Budgetary concerns" the official explanation given, though the real reason was simple gunshyness, and everyone knew it. I served as the expedition's chief geologist, my primary duty being to oversee the extraction of eganinium from Pluto's subsurface deposit; a serious responsibility to be sure, but one with which I felt reasonably comfortable, despite having a smaller workforce, a tighter schedule, and a slimmer budget than any previous expedition. The Murata Corporation needed to compensate for the *Mehitobel*'s failure, simple as that, and time was of the essence. Pluto's orbit was carrying it toward the sun, and within the next two years the surface of solid nitrogen would sublime, resulting in a dense, turbulent atmosphere that would preclude mining for nearly a century.

Thirteen months in stasis feels like the hard sleep after the bachelor party to end all bachelor parties. Coming out of it, I knew the *Akhenaten*'s life-support units were functioning perfectly because my limbs felt as if scorpions had built nests in them, and I would have sworn that someone had stuffed a rasp down my throat. Fortunately, the revival system IVs flushed away these horrid aftereffects in a matter of minutes, and once I felt more or less capable, I pulled myself out of my crypt and onto the gravideck. My legs were wobbly but able to support my body, which weighed about point-

seven Earth norm inside the rotating fuselage, and thanks to the revival batteries my heart and lungs adjusted readily to the change in my physical state. Around me, I could hear the sounds of the ship gradually coming to life: a few coughs, a grumble here and there, the *thump-clump-patter* of unsteady footsteps. Then an unmistakable baritone growled, “There be some sorry life here,” which told me to expect the whip to crack before we could even wash the sleep from our eyes.

The first thing I did was collect my dataclip—my hot link to the ship’s brain—from the drawer next to my stasis bay so I could prepare for the upcoming briefing. Then I started for Audit One, taking cautious, deliberate steps, ignoring the tremors in my months-empty stomach, knowing it would be some hours before I could tolerate solid food. Long before the faintest spark of awareness had intruded on my enforced oblivion, the revival system had begun prepping my body for normal functioning, but one didn’t spring up from a thirteen-month nap and hit the ground running.

Unless you were Captain Samuel “Red” Tupper, who apparently put no stock in rumors of post-hibernation lethargy. I knew he was behind me when the gangway began to shudder rhythmically, and a heavy hand came down on my shoulder, squeezing it as if my bones were malleable things to be shaped to suit his whim.

“Morning, Mr. Sykes,” he said, his voice a bellow even at conversational level. “I’ll expect the LDI analysis from you within half an hour. I need coordinates for dropping the E-drills, and I want you on the surface as soon as they’re down.”

“Roger, Skipper,” I muttered, though the huge, red-bearded figure moved past me so quickly I doubt he even heard. No moss ever gathered beneath those clodhoppers.

Audit One was the main briefing room, the site of the post-hibernation party for non-ship systems personnel. Here Tarec, our computer, would fill us in on any mission-related data that might have changed during our voyage. We would catch up on any news from home, personal or otherwise, only at the end of company business.

I saw a slim figure standing at the briefing hall entrance, and I barely recognized her until her husky voice said, “Hello, sailor,” and her turquoise eyes brightened as she smiled. Her sandy hair had grown six inches since our departure from Earth.

“Kathryn,” I said with a nod of greeting. “Glad to see we’ve woken up alive.”

“Just in time to make some money for Uncle Takashi.”

Kathryn Rhodes had been my number one for four years, with two missions to Titan under her belt. I expected this to be her last as an assistant, for she was overdue for a slot as chief geo. I know it was selfish of me, but when that time came I almost wished she would decline the promotion. Not entirely for professional reasons.

Audit One was a large chamber containing several rows of seats, some of which were already occupied; a bank of holo and vidpanels suspended from the ceiling; and a massive, circular port in the curved floor through which we could see a field of fiery stars slowly gliding past. The panels displayed various images of Pluto and Charon as viewed by our forward-mounted scanners, so crystal-clear that the electronic screens might as well have been portals into the void.

Even in the chamber, which hummed with life, seeing the distant stars and those dark, desolate planetoids filled me with an aching loneliness, a sense that I truly stood at the edge of the universe. An insignificant gnat that had flown too far from home and gotten lost in the vastness of space.

I took a quick count and found that most of my geo crew had already arrived, and the rest were just filing in. Tarec could just as easily handle the briefing, but tradition called for the chief geo to present it “live,” so to speak, so I slipped my dataclip behind my ear and started the transfer of the main mission file. As clear as my own thoughts, the details of our operation unfolded in my head, the updated matrix automatically comparing itself to the original I had loaded prior to launch. The transfer agent would stop to query me only in the event of a major deviation between the files.

Which is exactly what it did, just as I was about to take my place at the lectern that hovered above the circular viewport. I paused, looked around, and saw that Kathryn had also stopped in her tracks, one hand on her dataclip, her face a bemused question mark.

Even as our eyes simultaneously registered bafflement, over the PA system disembodied voices began querying others, some calling for verification of deviant data, others issuing orders to Tarec, one requesting the captain’s presence at Navcom.

According to the data I was receiving, Tarec *should* have brought the ship systems crew out of stasis ten weeks earlier. Circumstances had dictated human intervention, yet the *Akhenaten* had sailed blithely on and, contrary to alert protocol, entered its pre-programmed orbital groove two hundred miles above Pluto.

“There’s something at Point Echo Gamma One,” Kathryn said, and we both turned to look at the holopanel above us—which would be bringing our final orbital station into view within the next few minutes. “Quite a few somethings, if the analyzer is correct.”

I nodded, my dataclip having confirmed the information. “There should be nothing and no one out here,” I said. “No one authorized, that is.”

Kathryn held up a hand as she picked up a new transfer from her dataclip. “I’m getting some details from the communications log. Jesus, no transmissions received since dash-five-nine. And no confirmations of any of our outgoing. That right there should have triggered Alert One.”

“Diagnostics indicate shipboard systems nominal. No preempts of any autofunctions. All routine transmissions logged as completed.” I gazed curiously at the stars beyond the viewport. “It’s as if they were ... swallowed ... somewhere out there.”

“And the ship simply ignored alert procedure.”

We stiffened as the dire realization fell upon us simultaneously.

“Something’s wrong with Tarec,” Kathryn finally said.

Neither of us spoke as *Mehitobel*’s ghost paid a chilling call, prompting us to wonder how close we might have come to following its crew into oblivion. Who knew if, prior to the failure of its life-support systems, that ship had experienced similar anomalies? Was there something *out here* that played havoc with shipboard systems?

“Geo execs to Navcom,” Captain Tupper’s voice called. “Make haste.”

Without a word, Kathryn and I headed for the ship’s nerve center at the forward end of the fuselage. There we found the command crew staring fixedly at the bank of holopanel that dominated the chamber, the captain and Deena Ellis, his XO, as spellbound as the rest. In the amber light that saturated the room, Captain Tupper’s eyes looked redder than his hair.

“What do you suppose we’re seeing here, Mr. Sykes?”

I thought it was a great, gaping crater, perhaps the caldera of some immense volcano, from which spidery cracks radiated in every direction, as

if a huge fist had hurtled out of deep space to gouge a hole the planet's frozen surface.

At least, that was the view on panel one. Panel two, however, which focused on the same sector but from an oblique angle, told a completely different story.

Here, to my shock, the vast black area appeared to be the inverse of the original image: a towering, conical monolith whose crown rose countless miles above the surface, its surfaces gleaming onyx laced with veins of red that blazed angrily against the backdrop of space. Its spidery arms were not cracks in the planet's crust, but an endless number of long, branchlike appendages that groped their way to outer space as if seeking the sun, billions of miles distant.

The incredible disparity between the images made me feel queasy. I had to put a hand on the nav console to steady myself.

Tera Keller, at the helm, called out, "Coming up on orbital point Alpha, T-minus thirty seconds, mark."

"We're not breaking orbit?" Kathryn asked.

Tupper shook his head. "Can't plot a new course yet. Tarec seems to be ... confused ... by conflicting data. We're working on it manually, just in case. But we're already in the groove to go on station. We try to pull out now, we're liable to careen right into Charon." He half chuckled.

The way he'd said that Tarec was "confused" rekindled my nausea, but there was nothing to do but plod onward and rely on our training for coping with unforeseen situations. Keller began his countdown from ten, at the end of which I felt a very subtle shift beneath my feet as the retros kicked in and the *Akhenaten* parked herself at Point Alpha, two hundred miles above the eganinium deposit that had drawn us here.

"On station," Keller said. She glanced at the captain. "Shall I keep the boilers hot?"

"Hell yes, keep 'em hot," Tupper said. He stepped over to Masao Kochi, our sci exec, who was entering data into his workstation with frenzied fingers. "Anything on those contacts we picked up in the area?"

"Nothing conclusive," Kochi said. His uncle was one of Murata Corp's most fiscally conservative administrators, who got along with our skipper not at all; thus, Tupper frequently came down hard on the young man, just on principle. Tupper scowled at him, but Kochi ignored it. "I've picked up

over a hundred individual marks, but I can't get a reading on them. Whether they're organic, mechanical, or otherwise ... I can't say."

"Then lock number three cam on one of them and eyeball the damn thing."

Kochi shook his head in exasperation. "Trying to, sir. Tarec's not holding vis coordinates long enough for me to get a lock."

"Just like the nav systems," Deena Ellis said. "Tarec knows something is wrong but not what or why. And it's not flagging a single anomaly."

"We're lucky we made it out of bed, aren't we?" Kathryn said to me softly.

"Something tells me that if *Mehitobel's* crew had woken up, they would have found exactly this."

"At least that ship made it back intact," she said, obviously grasping for anything even remotely hopeful.

I rarely worked in Navcom, but there was a geoscanning station there with my name on it, so I settled into the seat, logged in, and brought up a chart of Point Echo Gamma One, the site of the eganium deposit. It was a rough oblong, about ninety miles by forty miles at its widest point, just north of Pluto's equator, on the hemisphere that perpetually faced Charon. The scanners confirmed the presence of eganium, a peculiar, unstable element of which one metric ton could power a megalopolis for a decade or propel a spaceship to the end of the solar system in just over a year. It was the most hazardous and most prized substance ever discovered, and as far as anyone knew, it existed only on Pluto.

Currently, however, *something* was happening on the surface. Tarec confirmed the presence of moving objects but could not identify them. Whatever the incredible formation was that we saw rising from the surface—or deeply penetrating it, depending on one's vantage point—our ship's brain acknowledged its existence but could neither measure it nor ascertain its physical properties. Our scanners had detected the first signs of it ten weeks earlier, yet Tarec had failed to revive the executive crew. The latter point disturbed me more than the irregularity itself.

As I focused the viewer on the icy plain below, I would have sworn I was looking at a vast protuberance hovering above the surface, shaped like a forked tree branch, its onyx "skin" laced with veins of red—almost resembling striated muscle, I thought. But as my eyes followed its contours,

I realized they were tracking the edges of a huge crevasse, and the red veins were glowing filaments that wound their way deep into the bowels of the frozen planet. Even on the panel, the shifting image made my head swim, and I had to back away for a moment to fend off another attack of nausea. I never could have imagined an optical illusion so intense, so disorienting; an illusion that toyed not only with human eyes but also with the most sophisticated artificial brain ever developed.

“Good God,” came Kathryn’s voice, and I glanced back to see her studying my panel with bright, bulging eyes. “Whatever that is, it’s damned impossible.” She hesitated for a second and then pointed to the display. “Did you see that?”

I nodded. For a fleeting moment, something had appeared on the viewer, moving far too quickly to identify. I zoomed out to try to find it again, but without success. Theoretically, Tarec should have detected the target, locked on it, analyzed it, and displayed a tactical image, yet the computer told me no more than my eyes had: only that an unidentified *something* had passed in and out of view, possibly guided by intelligence, no further details available. I allowed myself to indulge in a moment of frustration, barely holding at bay the rising dread that the system on which our lives most depended had suffered a catastrophic malfunction.

I felt the captain’s presence before he said a word. When I glanced up, his eyes were glued to my panels, the hand that clutched the arm of my chair an ivory claw. “Tell me you’re having more success than we are, Mr. Sykes.”

I shook my head. “Scans all inconclusive. I picked up at least one moving target, but I can’t even get a manual fix.”

“Not your job. We’re on that. What I need from you is an analysis of that behemoth down there. I want to know what it’s made of and whether it has anything to do with the ... difficulty ... we’ve run into.”

“But what the hell could cause this?” Kathryn asked, more to the air than anyone in particular.

Captain Tupper gave her a searching stare and said, “That’s what I need you to tell *me*.”

“I think we’ve reached the limit of the data that shipboard systems are going to provide. How about a manual probe, Skipper? Permission to launch?”

“Do it,” he said. “And link directly to its sensors. Bypass Tarec altogether.”

I nodded, already planning to do just that, despite knowing I’d get a hell of a headache as my dataclip received more streams of unfiltered data than my brain was accustomed to. Well, they made Cortedrine specifically to alleviate that problem, so I logged into an OE90 probe, made sure all the ports were clear, and sent the launch command. A few seconds later, the carrier signal vibrated through my skull, and then the data started coming in so fast and hard that it jolted my entire body. But I managed to process it without faltering, and within a few moments, in my field of vision, I could see exactly what the probe was seeing in three dimensions, along with an analytic readout that I could narrow-track at my discretion.

The craggy, blue-gray surface of Pluto whirled toward my eyes like a silent cyclone until the probe reached a point about twenty miles above the apex of the monolithic structure. I commenced an automated contour scan, and the figures that came through described a roughly cone-shaped object about twenty miles in diameter at its base, rising to a height of over a hundred miles. From this central trunk, dozens of translucent domes bulged like grotesque, oily blisters, and from many of these sprouted countless clusters of the tendril-like stalks I had viewed on my holo. *So far, so good.* I selected a few random sections of the base and hit them with the probe’s lasers to determine its composition. I should have been floored, but was only mildly surprised when the primary component came back as eganinium.

Surely, then, this thing contained Pluto’s entire supply of the unstable element. The tower appeared oddly organic, almost as if it had been birthed by the planet itself—or by some monstrous, unimaginable god concealed within. I knew, however, that this was no natural formation; someone or something had constructed it, for purposes yet unknown to us. It stood to reason that it would be intensely radioactive, yet my instruments detected nothing beyond the range that would normally register from the subsurface deposit.

I directed the probe to orbit the columnar axis at a range of twenty miles, and focused its viewers on the red veins that spiderwebbed the long, black protrusions. Eganinium typically appeared as a translucent, blue-violet crystal; nothing like the devilish-looking thing that rose from the surface of

Pluto. Perhaps the black substance was a shield of some sort, which might explain the relatively low radiation count. I fired an analyzer beam into the nearest vein, but it reflected no data back to the probe. It simply swallowed the beam.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered. But a second later, in the area where the beam struck, I discerned something moving along the tar-black trunk of the monolith. It was too small and distant to identify, so I broke the probe out of orbit and sent it in close, hoping to get a solid fix on the object. It remained indistinct until I tweaked the spectrograph sensors, which finally allowed me my first good look at one of the things that so far had defied analysis.

It was a bug. A huge, three-winged, multi-legged bug, with a bulbous head and numerous stalk-like, crab-clawed appendages. The thing was half scuttling, half drifting along the onyx surface, periodically pausing to manipulate what appeared to be some sort of metallic device it carried in one grasping arm. I tried to run a series of measurements, but now the image on the viewer began to warp strangely, becoming a shifting, kaleidoscopic mosaic, and my virtual readouts simultaneously went dead. This might have been an effect of radiation on the probe, I thought, but my gut told me it was something else entirely.

A few moments later, the image returned to clarity, although the readouts remained dark. Then I saw, in the black sea beyond the pillar-like appendage, at least a dozen of the insect-like things drifting toward the first, their angular, triple wings spread wide, as if to catch a swell of solar wind. A few of them settled on the polished black surface and began energetically working with the curious-looking metal rods they carried, while the others continued on to another section of the protuberance.

It was these creatures. *They* had built the gigantic structure from the eganinium deposit many miles beneath the Plutonian ice. The prospect nearly floored me. Beyond the fact that these things existed out here, the technical ability they must possess, the sheer stamina to have done such a thing—it all seemed quite unthinkable. Apparently immune to millions of roentgens passing through their bodies, unfazed by the lack of atmosphere, they worked merrily on as I watched them via the probe, their tools cutting deeply into the strange black rock, their wings gleaming faintly as if either absorbing or giving off energy. I soon saw that the creatures were actually

etching the bright red veins, for where the tips of the tools cut into the surface, pools of hot crimson welled up like blood from deep lacerations.

I felt rather than saw Kathryn hovering anxiously behind me, so I directed her to log in with her dataclip. She had less experience with unfiltered data transfers, but under the circumstances I knew she would prefer suffering the unpleasant physical effects to missing the momentous event I was witnessing.

She had just established contact with the probe when I felt something lurch in my head, and my field of vision flashed alarmingly. I attempted to regain control with my instruments, but something had happened, and now the probe was moving rapidly toward the huge black limb, as though of its own volition. I heard Kathryn gasp as she saw the creatures for the first time, and again when she realized I had lost control of the probe. We could only watch helplessly as the red-veined surface hurtled toward our eyes, and just before the probe impacted, I saw the bulbous head of the first insect turn to regard it for the first time, its great globular eyes ever so briefly meeting my gaze.

As if it had actually seen me.

I expected my viewer to go dead when the probe smashed into the stone, but another surprise awaited me: rather than blanking, my view simply changed—as if the probe had passed through the solid surface material and continued on its way on the other side. But now, just as when viewing the structure via Tarec's scanners, I realized I was seeing a portion of the alien structure as if it had been turned inside out. Every convexity was now a concavity, and the long, spindly protrusions that extended from the trunk appeared as deep crevasses in the planet below, and even in the empty backdrop of space. This was no trick of the eye or brain, yet it *had* to be illusion of some kind, produced at the electronic level.

A few moments later, the probe, still out of control, began spiraling toward Pluto, and my retinal display went completely awry. Rather than suffer through the terrible vertigo, I severed the connection and backed away from the geostation, as weak and burned out as if lightning had arced through my skull. Kathryn and I simply stared at each other for countless ages, our bodies and emotions too shaken to attempt coherent speech. Everything we had seen had been logged to the captain's console, so he

could view it for himself when he had an opportunity, but I knew he would want an immediate report.

I didn't have to go to him. Less than a minute later, Tupper was at my station. "What do you have for me, Sykes?"

"Just enough to add to the confusion." I gave him the rundown on the structure's composition and the repeat instance of what I was coming to think of as the inversion effect. I saved the revelation of the insect-like creatures till the end; but by now, the captain appeared nonplussed.

"We're seeing them now too," he said, nodding toward the executive stations. "Not so sure what to make of these beasts, but there are hundreds of them. Hard to keep track. Something about their properties, we can't maintain visual locks on them."

"Like the 'illusions' we're seeing," Kathryn said. "It's as if they're phasing in and out of our material universe. Crossing dimensions, or something."

"Skipper," I said, "something knocked that probe down. It wasn't an effect of radiation, I'm certain of it. Given what's happened to Tarec ... it's my opinion that our ship systems may be at serious risk."

"You're recommending we break orbit?"

"Immediately, sir."

"Are you in agreement, Rhodes?"

She glanced at me and then nodded. "Yes, sir. This situation needs investigating, but it should be done by a ship and crew outfitted specifically for that purpose."

Tupper's customary scowl grew more intense. "You realize that if we break orbit, fourteen months from now every soul aboard this ship will be unemployed?"

"I'm guessing that's better than the alternative," I said, my sense of misgiving deepening even as we spoke.

The captain glared at nothing for half a minute before speaking again. "I agree," he said. "This is an untenable situation."

With that, he returned to his command station, and I felt an ounce of relief that I had not had to argue to persuade him. In a disagreement, Tupper was beyond formidable. He was also not easily spooked, and I gathered from his manner that he was just as rattled by these events as Kathryn and I.

It occurred to me that, while I had shared our findings with him, he had told me nothing that the sci crew had learned.

“Captain Tupper to Audit One, zero-nine-zero,” called a sharp, disembodied voice. “Captain Tupper to Audit One, zero-nine-zero.”

An emergency call. He broke from his console, transferred command to Ellis, and before leaving Navcom pointed to Kathryn and me. “Come on,” he said. “That’s your crew in there.”

We made haste, Tupper with his hand pressed to his dataclip, his scowl becoming a dark, ominous thing as he received bulletins from the Tactical OD. When we entered Audit One, I saw several of the geo crew gathered around the circular view port in the floor, each face whiter than bone, all eyes fastened on something on the other side of the armorglass. Tupper dispersed them with a wave of his hand. We approached the viewport holding our collective breath, and when we gazed down into the black well of outer space and the gemstone stars slipping endlessly by, I’m quite certain each of our hearts stopped. Even the captain’s.

One of the insect-things was clinging locust-like to the armorglass viewport, its splayed legs somehow gripping the smooth, transparent surface, its bulbous head cocked so that one of its globular, green-gray eyes peered in at us with the distinct air of curiosity. The cylindrical body was about five feet long and tapered to a sharp tip that might have possessed a stinger, and its wings, now folded behind it, were leathery and bat-like, rather than translucent like an insect’s. While its body appeared to be encased by an exoskeleton, its texture appeared knotted and scaly, rather like an alligator’s hide. The lower portion of the abdomen undulated as if it were breathing, even in the void.

“By all the gods,” Tupper rumbled, placing his hands on his hips and squinting thoughtfully, as if sizing up a potential adversary. “Foul-looking, isn’t she?”

Kathryn bent close to the glass to peer at the thing, her eyes no more than a yard or so from the creature’s. My breath caught in my throat, and even with ten inches of virtually unbreakable glass between them, I could not suppress a keen fear that the thing might somehow do her harm, its one scrutinizing eye unmistakably as curious about her as she was about it. Though we had no evidence that it might actually be hostile, the creature’s fearsome appearance amplified my sense of misgiving a hundred times.

We had no biologist on board, so the captain summoned Mr. Kochi, the executive science officer. When the young man arrived and stepped into the disconcerting gaze of the thing beyond the glass, he froze in obvious horror, which gripped him for a full minute before his objective, scientific mind took over to pull him out of it.

“No way,” he said somewhat shakily, “is that thing indigenous to Pluto. Or anywhere in this solar system.”

“A geo could have told me that,” Tupper snapped.

“How can it survive in vacuum, unprotected?” Kathryn asked.

Kochi shrugged. “Maybe it’s not. What looks like an exoskeleton may be a kind of environmental shell. The actual creature might look different than what we’re seeing here. Assuming it’s even organic. None of our scanners will touch the thing.”

“Where do you suppose it comes from?”

“Damn good question,” he said. “And just as important, *how* did it get here? And when?”

“You think these things were in any way responsible for what happened to the *Mehitobel*?”

Kochi might have been formulating some theory when a collective gasp shook him from his thoughts. He stumbled backward just as the creature began to pass through the viewport, breaching the armorglass as if it were no more substantial than a layer of vapor, its body rising to hover above the portal like a living dirigible, its wings outstretched yet motionless, their purpose evidently something other than aerodynamic. The oversized skull swiveled back and forth as if mounted on a rotor, its malevolent-looking eyes surveying the chamber, though whether it was enraged or merely curious, I could hardly speculate. I heard thudding footsteps as many of my crew hastily vacated the auditorium, and someone called for a fire extinguisher, presumably to use as a weapon.

I held up a hand and shouted for my remaining crew to stay calm and make no move against the creature. It could pass through solid matter; who knew what else it might be able to do, or what its intentions were? I saw Captain Tupper standing brazenly before it, his body a defiant bulwark, his eyes glaring at it so fiercely that I found myself as awed by his courage as by our incredible visitor. The insect-thing drifted slowly toward him, its eyes meeting his and briefly flashing, as if photographing him and storing

his image to its memory. Then, for a moment, by the way the creature paused and lowered its head, almost like a bull preparing to charge, I fully expected it to attack. But Captain Tupper puffed out his chest, clenched his fists, and unleashed a stare so withering that even the airborne horror appeared to diminish before him.

It was Kathryn who stepped forward then, her face pale and drawn but intensely curious, and the bony skull-head swiveled slowly toward her, its eyes again flashing significantly. As if sensing in her something other than fear or anger, the thing glided toward her and stopped, its huge, glistening eyes only a few inches from hers. I heard the clatter of footsteps behind me as several of the geo crew came running, obviously intent on protecting one of their own, but I again waved them back, adamant that no one take any action that might provoke the creature's rage.

"What are you?" Kathryn whispered, as if the thing could possibly understand. "Where do you come from?"

To my surprise, something about the insect's aspect seemed to change—a vague softening of its revolting features, perhaps—as if it were absorbing her thoughts and attempting to formulate a response. Its huge eyes peered deeply into Kathryn's, and I realized then that her gaze was now fixed, her facial muscles slack, her mind seemingly in the creature's thrall. *Vulnerable*, I thought, with mounting alarm.

"Damn if it doesn't understand her," I said to Captain Tupper. "I think it's actually reaching into her mind."

The big man nodded and took a step toward it, which drew the beast's attention, and Kathryn's body wavered unsteadily. I placed one hand behind her back to make sure she didn't fall, but she gave no indication that she was aware of me. The captain continued to move toward the thing, which alarmed me more and more, for the creature's aspect had now reverted to malevolent.

Tupper growled, "What the hell are you? And what is *that*?" He pointed to the circular portal and the black and red stone tendrils that were just beginning to inch into view with the rotation of the fuselage.

The gray-green eyes swiveled toward Kathryn again, and without warning it darted forward, not simply striking Kathryn but plunging *into* her body, penetrating her flesh and bone the way it had penetrated the armorglass portal. However, instead of passing through her, it appeared to

merge with her, dissolving into her body and vanishing altogether. Kathryn gasped and gurgled thickly in her throat, her body going ramrod straight before stiffly lurching a few steps away from me. She turned to face the captain, her eyes revealing themselves to be huge and gray-green like the insect's. Her jaw dropped, and with a grunting, grumbling preface, she said merely, "Yahh."

The captain glanced at me, and I heard more footsteps as several crewmen rushed forward. "Somebody bring me a stunner," he said, "If we can knock her out, maybe we'll get the creature as well."

"Yaaaahhhhh," Kathryn moaned.

"Skipper, no," I said, my body gripped by an electric fist. "You don't know what that thing is doing to her body. It may kill her if we make any move against it."

"YAAAHHHH," Kathryn's voice rose. Her discolored eyes bulged so terribly I feared they might erupt from their sockets.

But then everyone in Audit One froze as Kathryn Rhodes's body slowly rose from the gravideck to hover several feet above the floor, her back arching, her head tilting backward with the sound of cracking bone. Her jaw extended so far that the corners of her mouth began to ooze blood.

"YAAAGGGHHH! YAAAGGGHH ZADDAGGGHHH."

A second later, she fell heavily to the floor, and the vaporous horror that had violated her body reassumed its insect shape in the air above her. It spread its mandibles, released a string of unfathomable shrieks and clicks, and then simply vanished, leaving behind a horrific odor, like formic acid and sulfur, which seared our nostrils and brought burning tears to our eyes.

I rushed to Kathryn's still form, took her wrist, and searched frantically for a pulse. There was none.

"Captain Tupper to Navcom," the PA rang out. "Zero-nine-zero. Captain Tupper to Navcom. Zero-nine-zero."

For several moments he did not move. No one did. I squeezed Kathryn's hand, unable to comprehend or accept that she might be gone. I kept saying her name, expecting—hoping—to rouse her from a merely tormented slumber, my eyes willfully shutting out the sight of her twisted neck, her slack, broken jaw.

I was not aware of Captain Tupper bolting from Audit One, or of hearing the call to prepare to break orbit, or the panicked cries of those who saw the

strange colors that seemed to ooze from the monstrous structure on Pluto, turning its empty sky a hue of silver-black-crimson-violet that resulted in the almost immediate blindness of those who were watching through the open viewports.

I knew none of these things because I was collapsed over Kathryn's corpse, weeping behind clenched eyelids.

* * *

The next time I opened my eyes, it was thirteen months later. I could see, but I had no memory of having been escorted to my stasis bay, locked in, and sent into hibernation. The majority of the *Akhenaten's* crew had witnessed the phenomenon on Pluto through the holopanel only, which apparently filtered the alien spectrum. Sadly, it was the geo crew, stationed in Audit One, that had been most affected. Fully two-thirds of its number had been struck blind.

Once fully revived, I made straight for Navcom, where I found Captain Tupper seated at his command station, his beard long and streaked with gray, his eyes cold and weary, his once-ruddy face now pale and gaunt. At the moment, he was alone in the chamber. On the panels, I could see the distant, blue-and-white-marbled disc of planet Earth swimming in the star-speckled black velvet sea. We were still at least two days out from Ashur Five, our orbital docking station.

Tupper barely acknowledged my presence. He simply sighed heavily and nodded at the panel.

"They've followed us," he finally said.

"What?"

He switched the main panel to aft view. It took a moment, but I soon noticed several silver-gray dots of distinctly familiar, ominous configuration drifting among the stars. Tupper zoomed in on them, and something in my chest lurched as the contours of the insect-things became clear. I should not have been surprised, yet I felt the same pangs of disbelief and anger as when Kathryn's life had slipped from her body. I counted at least a dozen of them, and trailing at some distance was a host of suggestively shaped dots, surely numbering in the hundreds.

“I picked them up yesterday,” Tupper said. “But they must have been behind us all along. They only came into visual range when our retros fired.”

“Yesterday?” I asked. “When did you come out of stasis?”

He shook his head. “Never went back to sleep. I didn’t dare leave Tarec to oversee operations, especially the stasis bays. And it was the right decision. Tarec is scrambled for good.”

“You’ve been awake for the whole year?”

“Ellis too. If we hadn’t, you—and everyone—would be dead now.”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly too dry to speak.

“But Ellis is dead. Since a month ago. Went out an airlock.”

“Suicide?” I managed.

He nodded. “Don’t know what came over her. Loneliness. Hopelessness, maybe. Anyway, there was no warning.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ve not been able to regain contact with Earth. Communications ... completely fried. I’ve been flashing emergency codes with the external lights, but I’ve no idea if they’ve been picked up. No sign of commerce out there yet. Maybe in the next twelve hours. Except ...”

“What?”

Tupper directed my attention back to the aft-facing panel. “It’s clear that the creatures are following us. That being the case, one might consider it reckless to lead them straight to our home world.” He set the panel for maximum magnification and set its focus on what I recognized as Pluto’s orbit. “Especially since I feel we’re facing an even graver situation.”

The panel now displayed the area of space we had left behind during the past few months, and again my heart felt as if it were exploding in my chest.

“This became visible shortly after the incident that left your crew blinded. It appeared in a quadrant of space light years beyond our solar system. Yet in the past few months, it has passed into our system and has reached an area near the orbit of Mars. At the rate it is catching up to us, I estimate we have only a few days. At first, I thought it was following us, but it’s actually the creatures themselves, I think. Anyway, it amounts to the same thing: if we continue on course to Earth ...”

The thing on the panel display must have been bigger than the earth itself. I recognized it immediately as the entity that the structure on Pluto had represented: something immense, alive, and sentient, something that could destroy worlds with a strike of but one of its fingers, thousands of which now groped and seethed and writhed like solar prominences from its incomprehensible mass. One thing the insects' depiction had failed to replicate was the congeries of luminous globes that blazed from its center section, globes that I could only take to be *eyes*, all of which were now focused plainly *on us*.

"Our observatories and tracking stations will have detected this thing," Tupper said. "The code I have been flashing for the last few months warns against any recon, any investigation, anything that will draw the thing's attention away from us. I have advised a global blackout as it comes into range. I can only hope they've seen my message."

I looked around at the empty, all but silent chamber. "You didn't wake anyone else, did you?"

He shook his head. "At first I intended to let you stay asleep until the end. But I have a decision to make, and I don't think too clearly anymore, Sykes. I'm ... tired."

"What is it?"

"Our emergency pods will hold only two-thirds of the crew. You're aware of that, right?"

I nodded, having known all along that, in the event of a catastrophic emergency, I, as one of the senior execs, would have to go down with the ship. One of those practical cost-saving measures the Murata Corporation had implemented for our journey.

"We have the opportunity to save the majority of the crew. But you and I are not among them, Sykes."

I felt the first cold fingers beginning to work their way down my back. All I could do was nod again.

"However, we are being observed. If we launch the pods, I reckon that thing is going to see them. And if those pods go to Earth, it's no different than if we take the ship right on into Ashur Five."

It took no great leap of the imagination to figure out what he was planning. "The *Akhenaten* is going to bypass Earth altogether. Hopefully leading that thing away with us."

“I don’t believe I can risk saving any of the crew, Sykes. What do you have to say about that?”

I looked at the monstrous image on the panel and soon my eyes began to burn. For all I knew, it might be emitting the same blinding colors as the artificial thing that had summoned it across the light years.

“A hard choice, Skipper.”

Tupper reached across to his instrument panel and entered some codes. “Those bugs. They’re broadcasting signals we can pick up on certain bands. I suspect that’s what’s actually drawing that horror down on our heads. Don’t you think?”

The sounds that rose in my ears reminded me of crickets and frogs chirping and buzzing on a midsummer’s night, modulated into a droning, repetitive rhythm:

“*Yagh-Zaddagh, Yagh-Zaddagh, Yagh-Zaddagh, Yagh-Zaddagh.*”

“You have no way of knowing whether anyone has seen or deciphered your codes,” I said. “What if ships have already been sent out there? What if that thing is already aware of Earth?”

“Then it doesn’t much matter what we do.”

I nodded morosely, trying to keep images of Kathryn’s dying moments out of my head. Finally, in a voice that barely escaped my lips, I said, “I don’t believe we can risk the pods. sir.”

He looked at me for a long time, his eyes burning almost as intensely as the brilliant orbs out there in the depths of space. Finally, he turned to his controls and began entering his data, which he had obviously prepared well in advance. When he was finished, he slowly, painfully rose from his chair and disappeared for a time. When he came back, he had a bottle and two glasses.

“I’ve put us on maximum power, which may buy us a few more days. I don’t think I want that thing to catch up to us before we go into the sun.”

“Understood, sir.”

He handed me a glass, and I took a long swallow of the rum. It was old and good, and for several minutes I actually felt contented and at peace. I knew I would never have a chance to regret my decision. *Our* decision.

“Thanks, Skipper,” I said. “In a way, I’m guess I’m glad to you brought me out, rather than go to the end oblivious.”

“You say that now, but you still have plenty of time to think about it. Just say the word, and I’ll put you back in stasis. Or ... offer you another alternative.”

I looked at the vidpanel, and the horrible thing that seemed to have grown larger even in the last few minutes. I shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’ve got this time to make my peace. How about I let you know?”

He looked at the distant, seething devil, and shuddered visibly. “Yeah. We’ve got time.”

I nodded.

* * *

The sun’s gravity had pulled the *Akhenaten* past the point of no return when *Yagh-Zaddagh* began to slow as it approached Earth. I was not aware of this at the time because, without my knowledge, Captain Tupper had narcotized me, returned me to hibernation, and launched my stasis capsule in an escape pod, apparently only moments before it was too late to do so. All I knew was that I woke up some weeks later in the sickbay of the *Vardinoy*, a freighter that had joined the fleet of surviving Earth ships and set about rescuing any castaways that might be found in the navigable space lanes. I was lucky because the *Vardinoy* was just retiring from its final recon flight when it picked up the faint signal from my pod’s transponder.

I say I was lucky. I wish the skipper had taken me with him on his final journey. I don’t know why he did what he did; I suppose he felt it was some final act of kindness, his way of atoning for whatever transgressions he felt he had committed in this life.

Yagh-Zaddagh had already cleared the earth by the time I returned to consciousness. Of that cosmic monstrosity, there was no more sign than there was any indication that humankind had once been the dominant species on the blue and white marble the *Vardinoy* and fleet were leaving behind for destinations unknown. While the fate of the *Akhenaten*’s remaining crew would probably have been no different had Captain Tupper opted to spare as many as he could before it hurtled into the sun, the irony, I believe, is that the horror from beyond our solar system had never been following us specifically. Its target had been the Earth all along, and it was

simply happenstance that we happened to be where we were when the insects from Pluto began their long voyage across the solar system.

I believe this is so because, on the *Vardinoy's* holopanel, which will continually scan the Earth for as long as it is in range, we can see that the insects have set to work building a new gigantic likeness, this one amid the ruins of the eastern Asian continent. In the last month, as our little fleet has approached the orbit of Mars on its reach for the stars, we've watched the structure grow and spread steadily, almost as if it were building itself. It appears different from the one on Pluto; far larger, and somehow even more terrible, more *malignant*.

Soon I will enter hibernation one more time. Hopefully, I will awaken in a place where I can live out my remaining days before Yagh-Zaddagh comes.

Cult of the Dead

LOIS H. GRESH

Lois H. Gresh is the six-time New York Times best-selling author and USA Today best-selling author of 28 books and 60 short stories published in 22 languages. Titles include Dark Fusions: Where Monsters Lurk! (PS Publishing, 2013), Eldritch Evolutions (Chaosium, 2011), and Cult of the Dead and Other Weird and Lovecraftian Tales (Hippocampus Press, 2015). Current stories are in Black Wings III, The Madness of Cthulhu, Searchers After Horror, That Is Not Dead, Expiration Date, Darke Phantastique, Mark of the Beast, Eldritch Chrome, A Mountain Walked, Mad Science Café, and others. Lois has received Bram Stoker Award, Nebula Award, Theodore Sturgeon Award, and International Horror Guild Award nominations.

THE LIGHT WAVERS, THEN TWITCHES ONTO A ribcage, one of dozens studding the wall. A femur trips her, and she stumbles, clutches at the ribcages—*all small, must be children*—and recoils as her fingernails scrape bone. She almost drops the flashlight along with her sack of tools, but steadies herself—*living with the dead for six years, been dead all my life, what's there to be afraid of?*—and ducks beneath the arch encrusted with bird shells.

She claws her eyes, but the itch just won't go away. It's as if the *garua* fog follows her everywhere. Outside, it's the brume exhaled by the brown-shit sea, a foul breath that smothers all of Lima. Inside it's a paste, like the white of an old man's eyes as he dies, and the cold penetrates straight to her bones.

She wobbles forward, glances into the right pit at the thousands of fibula arranged with skulls to form flowers. *Beautiful*. Then she glances into the left pit at the flattened dust of the family buried hundreds of years ago. Crook of an elbow, baby held close, skirt etched in grime, husband huddled nearby; *what was it like for this woman to have a family?* Quilla Saparo can't imagine, she with her burning eyes, her orphan past, her miserable now, her nothing tomorrow.

Whatever she heard, possibly a small animal, whimpers again. There's no way anyone could have slipped past her. Nobody, not even Diego Toribio, administrator of the Lima Monastery, has ever ventured beneath the first level of the catacombs. This second level is Quilla's private sanctuary, her home.

No time to waste. She has to find out who, or *what*, is down here with her.

She crawls into the tunnel that she has carefully excavated over the years. As she enters, the tunnel shudders, and then it wheezes; and it's like sliding into the mouth of a beast, one that has swallowed something alive, something that now sounds like a little boy—

"Go away," he whines. "Leave me alone. Let me go." Quilla can't quite place his accent. Hers is from a mountain village outside Cusco, the result of thousands of years of Incan Quechua language merged with modern Peruvian slang. She escaped at thirteen to become a guide in the catacombs.

She flattens to her belly and wriggles through the passage. It slopes downward, twists left, straightens, then slopes again toward the third subterranean level. Bones jut from the walls, the bones of Spanish Catholics.

She can't imagine how the boy got into the lower levels. Nobody is allowed down here without a guide. People come in small groups, no more than ten at a time. It's all carefully controlled.

This boy could expose her and cause trouble. If Diego learns that Quilla stole the keys to the catacombs, dug beneath the first level, and worse, sleeps here, he'll call the police and have her imprisoned, beaten, raped, maybe even killed. You don't fool around with the Lima police.

She crawls past holes filled with toe phalanges, iliac fossa bones, hip joints, metarpals, and ulnas, everything arranged in intricate patterns. Eyes, tentacles, flying cats, three steps leading to four windows, then four steps leading to three windows. These are the patterns of the *paracas mantles*, the funerary blankets wrapped around the corpses of the royal Incans.

The boy is crying now, *terrified*, and she pictures him being smothered by the *garua*.

The tunnel groans and contracts, then spasms and squeezes her again. She tries not to breathe, to make herself smaller, but it's as if she's being swallowed by a snake. Her ribs hurt, *any moment, they're gonna crack*.

The *garua* swarms around her, and it *squirms* into her eyes. The tunnel hisses like a steam vent, and from far ahead is the clap of a thunderstorm. She starts wriggling backward, but something crashes up ahead—a *boulder?*—and bone powder roils down the tunnel and consumes her, and she chokes. She's completely blind now, straining to hear the child. *Is he dead?*

"Fertility, sacrifice, and the cult of the dead. The three things that matter. Humans, the dead royals who are supernatural gods, and the realm of ordinary dead. The three layers of being." A voice scratches like an old record and reverberates down the passageway. The words are in the ancient Quechua language.

The powder of a thousand bones dissipates and settles to fine gray dust, and Quilla claws again at her eyes. Three meters ahead, skulls leap from the dirt walls and clatter into heaps, and in their midst stands a creature, clearly not human. The body is a bloated grape covered in tufts of hair the color of

scars. The face is oval, the nose flat, the eyes black: *almost* Incan. Naked, its genitals hidden by abdominal folds, the creature is covered in tattoos, the patterns the same as in the bones Quilla passed. Bird claws, flying cats, tentacles, sun rays tipped with serpent or octopi heads.

The *garua* coagulates, the larger lumps tinged green like infected pus. Her eyes ache, *if only she could shut them ...*

Behind the creature, the boy's arms flail, his body trapped in a thicket of bones. His skin is brown, his eyes dark, his face flat, his nose wide: indigenous Incan.

Quilla inches closer, one eye barely open. She is at the lip of a large hole from which shoots the *garua*. The creature bristles, its scar-hair erect like porcupine needles, and Quilla smells a death more ancient than any death in the catacombs. "Are you—" Her voice cracks. "Are you human, dead, or supernatural god?"

"I'm not of the three realms. Not human. Not dead. And not a supernatural god."

"Then—" Quilla's mind races. There *is* nothing else. "Then what?"

"I'm of the fourth realm. It lies beneath the realm of the dead. *You* can come here, but only *you*."

"No," she insists, "you're crazy!"

"It's been centuries since we've seen one of your kind. Royal Incans, the entire bloodline, you never guessed, did you? Despite all the patterns, despite all the fears of any dollop of space unaccounted for in your three-realm scheme, you never *realized ...*"

The boy squirms. "Get me out of here!"

"Patience." Quilla lowers her voice to a whisper. She's thinking. The Incans believed that all three realms were in constant communication via offerings and fluids. The dead could have sex with the living. The supernatural could toy with both the living and the dead, or bless them. What if there *was* a fourth realm, and what if it communicated with the other three via the same mechanisms? Offerings and fluids.

The boy continues to scream as she peeks into the hole to the third level of the catacombs. It contains the usual pits of Spanish skulls and femurs, but then she sees it, a fourth level exposed by whatever has crashed from the ceiling of the tunnel. Gold funerary masks, the types worn by ancient Incan rulers. Gold ear plugs and nostril plates, the types attached to Incan

royalty when they died. Gold urns, gold-plated tunics and crowns, weapons of death: silver clubs with spikes, cleavers, and balls.

“*Tahuantinsuyu*, land of the four *suyus*, provinces. There have always been four realms of being. Why the ancients didn’t *realize* ... why you didn’t *see* ...”

“What do you want?” Quilla asks, her voice as steady as she can make it.

“I want nothing. Remember, you’re the one who came to *us*. You opened the second and third levels. The boy tampered with the tunnels. It was only a matter of time before the structure collapsed and let us out. We’ve been waiting on the fourth level from the dawn of time, coming out in trickles, in feeble streams.”

It’s true, what the creature says. The monastery has known of the second and third levels, and possibly of graves even lower, but they’ve excavated only the top level for fear the monastery itself would collapse. Quilla’s digging has been careful and quiet, bit by bit throughout the years. “The *garua* fog?” she asks.

A chuckle. “Yes. That’s why it’s nowhere else in the world, only in Lima. *We* are the *garua*. The Others. The Old Ones. Older than the Incans, and older than time.”

That’s why the fog has been thickening since Quilla started digging. She’s been releasing The Others from the fourth realm without knowing it.

“Do you know that you’re descended from Manco Capac?” asks the creature.

First ruler of the Incans. No, Quilla didn’t know it nor does she believe it.

“Yes, you’re the only direct blood descendant that remains.”

Voices echo from far away. Quilla thinks she hears a door creak open and then shut. Monks? Nuns? Diego Toribio?

Apparently, the creature hears the noise, too, and its quills bristle again, an apparent sign of agitation. The eyes never blink. The mouth never moves. Nor does the creature appear to breathe through its nose. Quilla wonders if the creature has presented itself in an anthropomorphic manner to dampen her fear.

Another squeak from above, and the creature slides into the hole.

Quilla has been flatlined forever, with no today and no tomorrow, and in Quilla’s short life it’s been people who have been cruel to her, not the dead

and certainly not a figment of her imagination ... or whatever this creature represents.

But for now the creature is gone, and the boy still shrieks and flails, and above them in the monastery, people are awakening, possibly for their meals, for prayer, or for the lively drunken parties they secretly have when they think nobody hears them.

She scrabbles over to the boy, grasps his arms, and yanks. He pops from the tangle of bones, panting, and stares at Quilla. His clothes are in tatters, filthy pants coated in mud and what looks like dried blood, the shirt no better. He's emaciated and tiny, no more than seven years old.

I'm sick, I'm sick, she thinks. My eyes are weak, and I'm dizzy, my head's spinning. Maybe a rock hit my head when the tunnel collapsed.

But the boy chatters about the creature, too, as they squeeze through the tunnel back to the second level where Quilla sleeps. The boy knows the catacombs well, but never before have they crumbled or fallen on him; and as with Quilla, this is the first time he has seen the creature. She learns his name. Topa Cusihuascar. "I come from the jungles in central Peru. We still have the Shining Path there, and they killed my family, so I fled to Lima. I follow the cats through the city, eat what they eat, sleep where they sleep. It's how I found the tunnel. I followed a cat down a hole behind a garbage bin outside the monastery. I found a tunnel to the catacombs." He's been living there, with a dozen cats, for the past year.

So he squirreled in from above ground. This is why she never noticed him sneaking past her.

They emerge from the tunnel, scramble to their feet, and breathe deeply. The cold drills into her bones, and she drapes her heaviest alpaca blanket over her shoulders and shivers.

"It would be easy to die here," he says. "They could make it look like the tunnel collapsed on you."

Quilla switches on a fresh flashlight and eases Topa onto another alpaca blanket, and she rests his head on her childhood pillow. "True," she says, "but why would anyone want to kill you, Topa?"

"You already know why." They exchange a glance, Quilla and this little boy, who already knows the bitter truths of life just as she knew them at his age. People like Quilla and Topa, with their pure Incan heritage, don't matter to people like Diego Toribio. The old prejudices are alive and well in

Peru, where most of the indigenous population remains unemployed, impoverished, bullied, condemned.

Voices rumble over their heads. Doors creak. It must be Diego and his security guards, off to dinner in the large room where they serve meals to the poor once a month. Diego won't be drinking thin soup. Oh, no. He and his staff eat very well: broiled fish and fried pork, strawberry juice, corn and meat pies. Quilla sneaks the scraps out of the kitchen at night.

"Is Manco Capac really your ancestor?" Topa asks.

She pours *chicha*, a purple corn juice, from the *urpu* jug she keeps by her blankets. Eagerly he drains the cup, and she refills it and offers him bread. "I don't know anything about my own family," she says, "much less Manco Capac."

"I don't know about my family either," he says. "Say, how do you think the family died, you know ... the family in the pit?"

She shrugs. Maybe it was plague. Maybe it was war. Why do people die? The old ways are gone, and the dead are no longer connected to the living, so there's no way to know.

Topa bolts up, knocking over the juice cup. He grabs one of Quilla's digging tools, a pick. "Listen! People! They're coming!"

"Take it easy." She hopes her voice sounds lighthearted but doubts it. "They're just eating dinner. They're pigs, but they won't hurt you."

"No! They're coming! We have to hide."

"They're *not*—"

But she is interrupted by the clink of keys on the monastery door that leads to the catacombs. And then boots are thumping down the stone stairs.

"They're on the first level," she whispers. "Shhh. They never come down this far." She curls up with Topa beneath the blankets. His head is on her shoulder, his skinny arms wrapped around her waist. Silently he weeps, the tears soaking into her threadbare shirt.

A bone drops somewhere. She hears a clunk on hard earth, and it is followed by another clunk, and now another.

Bones keep dropping from the ceilings and walls. And now more, and more, until it sounds as if a light rain has burst into a storm.

Bone cracks against bone, and the tunnel moans and wheezes, and directly above Quilla, the ceiling splits and *screaks*. Topa clings to her, curls

into the crook of her elbow, *the same as a baby curls into the elbow of the mother ...*

Is this what children do when they're scared?

But she's scared, too, and what do women do when they're all alone from birth till death, with every day a fight to survive? *Who comforts us? Who cares?*

The *garua* wraps like gauze around her. She's a wound smeared upon the earth. She's a disease, an infliction, a scab. Not worthy of life, not good enough for death.

The packed dirt of the ceiling throbs, bones dislodge and hurl themselves at her. They penetrate the *garua*, gash her head, shoulders, and legs. Despite the cold, sweat streams down her body as the pain crashes through her. The pain is steady now, a *thrum*, and it calms her. Topa is unconscious.

She smells Diego before she sees him. Beneath the heavy monastery robes, layer upon layer of rich velvet, his body has the rankness of one who rarely bathes. It is his smell. Always. It's as if his flesh is fermenting on his bones.

He stands over her, and flanking him are two guards in official uniforms: camouflage pants and shirt, military boots, bulletproof body-length shields, and, of course, the accouterment that goes with all official uniforms in Peru—machine guns.

"Look what you've done to our catacombs, my dear. It's a felony, worthy of execution, to dig beneath the first level. You've destroyed centuries of Lima's heritage and national treasures." A fat hand clad in a red silk glove gestures at the gap above her, where the ceiling has swelled and then ruptured like a blister.

I didn't do this. Topa did it. He dug in from the outside. He's a child. He doesn't know what he's doing.

But she's not going to turn Topa in to Diego and certain death.

"Who's the boy?" asks Diego.

Quilla eases Topa off her shoulder. She sinks against the wall. Diego can kill her, she doesn't care, she's been dead forever anyway; but Diego can't have the boy.

"Take him." Diego's cheeks wobble as he snaps his head toward Topa, and one of the two guards lowers his Uzi and wrenches Topa off the

blankets. The *garua* gauze breaks apart, filaments flake and drift, and settle on the blankets and packed earth.

Topa awakens and shrieks, but the guard clamps a fist over his mouth. Topa writhes and tries to punch the man, but the man just laughs, releases his hand, then slaps the boy's face, hard. Blood seeps from Topa's nose and streams from his mouth.

Quilla's pick is propped by the wall, and she grabs it. One flick of her wrist, and the pick will fly through the *garua* and lodge itself in the guard's neck. Diego is slobbering, *pig grease dribbling off a lard chin*, and she wants to *kill* him, but in the end she loosens her grip on the pick, for she's no killer, is she?

"It's not his fault," she says. "Another guide must have let him into the catacombs. Not me. I'd never do that, of course. But someone else ..."

"There's only one other guide. She's eighty-five and has been with the monastery all her life." Diego turns to the guard who is holding Topa. He thinks for a moment, then says, "Put the kid back down. He doesn't matter, but I may want to arrest Quilla Saparo. Illegal breaking and entering into a government-protected national historic site, illegal residence in said site, destruction of national treasures."

The guard flings Topa to the ground, then aims a cocksure smile and a cocked gun at Quilla. His Uzi rests at his side. She's too weak to run. She can't even stand without clutching the wall.

Diego gestures at the other guard and tells him to crawl through the tunnel and see what's there.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," says Quilla.

"Well, you're not me, are you? Go on," he snaps to the guard, "I've heard there's Incan gold down there. It's just a rumor, but if there's any truth to it, I want to be the one to find out."

"I can't get into the tunnel," the guard says. "It's narrow and all caved in."

"Damn. Well, there's always tomorrow, I suppose. Bring them both up." Diego grunts and waves a hand, and the guards drag Quilla and Topa up to the monastery, search them, and lock them up for the night. They take her keys, blankets, childhood pillow. In the morning, they toss Quilla and Topa onto the streets outside the monastery. The black iron gates clang shut.

Topa ducks his head and averts his eyes from the shuttered storefronts. He slips into an alley near the bright yellow monastery. Quilla hobbles after him. Cats scamper from their path. And now she sees it, the garbage bin by the crumbling blocks of an old house. Behind the bin is a hole just large enough for a cat or a boy, and possibly for an underfed nineteen-year-old girl.

“We need to eat first,” she says. “I don’t have the strength to go back in. Not yet.”

He nods, then squats and pulls several chipped dishes from beneath the garbage bin. They contain molding bits of meat and cheese. The food left for the stray cats of Lima. She tells Topa that they have to go to the richer section of town to eat from the garbage; then tonight, when it’s dark, they can return to the tunnels and to the catacombs. His stomach growls loudly. Her own feels concave.

They hitch rides on the back of laborers’ trucks and semi-doze past the elaborate Spanish cathedrals, angel wings spread over them, Catholic saints staring down from pedestals blasted into granite and marble, giant wooden doors embellished with spikes. Inside the cathedrals, she knows, is all the Incan gold, melted down by the Spanish conquerors and transformed into elaborate altars to their own gods and saints. Curses upon Francisco Pizarro, *conquistador del Peru y fundador de Lima. Nacio en Trujilla de extremadura Espana 1478, and murto—she spits—en Lima el 26 de Junio de 1541.*

Finally they’re at the bluffs overlooking the sea. Fancy shops and restaurants perch at the top of the cliffs, surfers ride the waves far below. The white sky undulates over the water. The *garua* sticks to her skin.

She and Topa scrounge for food in the trashcans, and, as she figured, they find the food garbage of rich people and tourists. Half-eaten sandwiches, corn breads, squashed fruits. They eat until her belly is swollen and aches. And then they drag themselves down the stairs and the winding road to the sea.

Her hands dig into the black gravel. Her fingers are bloated, her palms large and scabby. The sea is a murk of silt, black and gray, and lumps of shit rise on the froth, stick to the gravel, then sweep back with the undertow. Topa stares, hypnotized, and his brown skin is the color of the cliffs ... or has her sight dimmed so much that she now sees nothing but black, gray,

and brown? Is the static white of the sky real, or are her eyes playing tricks on her?

By evening, Topa is starving again, Quilla knows what they have to do. “Let’s go back,” she says, “and swipe a few trinkets from the catacombs. They won’t be missed. Just one or two gold pieces.”

“We can sell them!” His eyes light up. “We can live in a real house, and we can eat fresh food, whatever we want and as much as we want!”

“That’s right,” she says, “and why not?”

They hitch rides back to the old section of Lima, grab what’s left of Topa’s digging tools, and slink behind the garbage bin. This time the cats don’t scamper from their dishes. Instead, eyes glare at her, whiskers sharpen, teeth glow, and animals hiss.

With picks and shovels, they slip into the hole, some four or five feet down, a sheer drop, then scramble horizontally several yards. They crawl until they reach a tapered area, where the walls vibrate and wheeze. Quilla’s eyes burn from the dust and the *garua*. “It’s dangerous here,” she whispers to Topa. “The tunnels can collapse,” and she remembers what he said, how easy it would be to die here.

She trains her flashlight into a slender crevasse and to the glimmer of gold below. And this gives her renewed energy, and she and Topa dig—*carefully, they dig*—inching their way toward the glimmer.

“Now,” she says, squeezing through the widened crevasse and falling to the gold below. She lands on a pile of necklaces and headdresses, and the boy falls beside her. Her flashlight flits over stone sculptures of the three sacred animals, a bird from the heavens, a cat from the earth, and a serpent from the subterranean dead. Then the light shines on a fourth sculpture, a bloated grape covered in tufts of hair: the creature from The Others.

Around her the royal Incans, her ancestors, lie as dust in their graves. Heaped on the scattered bones and flattened remains are gold and silver nose ornaments, headdresses, and ear plugs carved with tentacles and eyes. Ceremonial vessels, *urpus*, are everywhere, and all bear the Incan symbols of water worship and blood sacrifice. Tiny cat heads form the spouts.

“What would your ancestors do about all this?” asks a voice, and before she swivels Quilla knows it’s the creature, The Old One. “Remember the Extirpation of Idolatries?”

Quilla nods. Even Topa knows how the Spanish destroyed the sacred objects and the *mallquis*, bodies of the dead Incans. In this way the Spanish destroyed the Incan civilization. There no longer was the tie between humans, supernatural, and dead.

The Cult of the Dead. It's all around Quilla, here in the fourth level.

"You can't rob your ancestors' graves," says the creature. "It makes you no better than the conquistadors."

"But we're starving. Why can't we have just one piece of gold?" Topa's little fingers clutch an ear plug.

"Because we're not Span—" Quilla starts to say, but before she can finish her sentence the ceiling caves in, and a huge body wrapped in red velvet slams against a rock wall, then crashes on Topa and rolls off.

Quilla digs through the debris, grabs Topa's body, and shakes him. He's dead, his skull smashed by a large rock that now rests between him and Diego Toribio. The administrator howls in pain. His left leg is skewed, broken at the knee.

Quilla throws down her flashlight. In her right hand is her digging pick. She screams and hurls herself at the fat Diego, whose face glows from sweat, eyes bulging from fear. "No!" he yells. "No, don't do it! Take all the gold you want! You'll be rich!"

She pauses, the pick mere inches from his face. She's not a killer. *Can't do it, can't do it ...*

And there's poor Topa, dead at seven, he with his orphan past, his miserable now, his nothing tomorrow. The Spanish have killed another of her Incan people. Topa.

She must take care of her people.

The *garua* is a paste, the white of an old man's eyes as he dies. It smears her eyes, nose, and lips. Her hand shakes.

From the shadows, the creature says, "You have already unleashed the fourth realm. Now complete the ritual and restore Incan rule to Peru."

All that is needed is an *urpu* of blood, the sacrificial offering that opens communications among the three—*no, the four*—realms of being.

Diego weeps hysterically, "No, please, I beg of you, no, please don't kill me." He's blubbering, the old fool, more frightened of death than a little boy. She sees him for what he is; and he might be worse than the murderers

of the Shining Path. He represents the Spanish oppressors who destroyed *all* Incan civilization and *all* her people.

She places a gold headdress on Diego and one on herself. She thrusts a spiked club into his hands. “Now fight me, old man,” she hisses, but Diego remains in the dust, crying. He’s injured, and it’s not a fair fight, but was it fair when the conquistadors showed up and mass-murdered her people?

She rips the headdress off him, hears a rasp from the creature, knows she’s done the right thing. It’s the ancient way. The Cult of the Dead. The funerary ritual. And who better to do it than Quilla of the royal blood? She reaches for a ceremonial knife. It glitters in the dark.

She’s not a killer. Can’t do it ...

“Take the gold, be rich ...”

These are Diego’s last words.

And Quilla Saparo screams a Quechua curse, and she raises the knife with both hands and slams it into his neck, and the blood gushes into the *urpu*.

Dark Redeemer

WILL MURRAY

Will Murray is a lifelong Lovecraftian and the author of several celebrated Mythos stories. Enormously prolific, he has written more than sixty novels in series ranging from The Destroyer to the Wild Adventures of Doc Savage, which includes Skull Island, pitting the Man of Bronze against the legendary King Kong. He also produces Radio Archives' successful Will Murray's Pulp Classics line of audiobooks and ebooks, which includes works by H. P. Lovecraft and A. Merritt.

1.

DISTURBING CONTACTS

WHEN HIS CELLPHONE RANG, DR. ROBERT Wentworth was on his way to work at the National Reconnaissance Office of the Department of Defense.

“Wentworth.”

“We have a man down,” a low voice told him.

Wentworth stiffened. “Is it safe to go to the office?”

“Unknown. Redirect to Location B.” The line went dead.

“Location B,” Wentworth muttered. “That means Non-Local Affairs. Damn. I hate Non-Local Affairs.” He pulled a skittery U-turn against traffic and shot north.

Dr. Wentworth had never been to Location B. That was how secret it was. Not simply black, but superblack. But he knew the address. As Deputy Director of NRO, this was mandatory—personal beliefs notwithstanding.

Seventy-five Tacoma was not what he expected it to be. A rambling white clapboard home zoned as a business 30 miles from the NRO’s Chantilly, Virginia, headquarters. The wrought-iron sign read: *Victoria Venkus Tea House. Fortunes. Palmistry. Astrology.*

This was Location B, otherwise the main station for the Cryptic Events Evaluation Section of the NRO, AKA Non-Local Affairs, colloquially derided as the “Weird Desk.” CEES’s mission was planetary defense.

The lot was full with customer cars. Parking his maroon Lexus, Wentworth stepped out into the sweltering late October heat and hurried to the back door. A short flight of steps led to a wooden landing too small to be called a back porch. By the time he climbed it, his suitcoat was soaked and plastered to his back.

Face dark with suffused blood, Wentworth pressed his leatherette ID card to the back-door glass while thumbing the buzzer.

The door was open by a violet-eyed woman who simply murmured, “In the attic.”

“Your name?” Wentworth demanded upon entering, his nose wrinkling at the pungent scent of nag champa incense.

“Call me Cassandra.”

Up a flight of suffocatingly winding stairs, past the second-floor living quarters, she brought Wentworth to a locked door. The pale brunette opened it with a silent keypad.

Another door opened on a sealed room. A lighted sign said: SESSION IN PROGRESS.

Wentworth growled, “What’s this?”

“RV chamber,” Cassandra explained.

“What?”

“Sorry. Remote viewing. We have a non-responsive viewer.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I’ll show you, sir.” Unlocking the door, she led Wentworth into an egg-shaped chamber where a man lay on a waterbed. Everything in the room was gray. Ceiling, rug, walls. Even the jumpsuit the sleeping man wore. He lay on a gray sheet. In the claustrophobic space, the very air appeared somehow grayish....

“He’s been like that over sixteen hours,” Cassandra reported. “The session was scheduled for ninety minutes. They never go out more than two hours.”

“So what’s the problem? Wake him up.”

“We can’t, sir. He didn’t return. It’s never happened before. Even the old Star Gate unit never lost a viewer to the Ether. They always come back.”

“Come back. Back from where?”

“We call it the Matrix of all Creation. It’s too complicated to go into now, but while the body lies before us, still functioning on an autonomic level, his mind went out there into the Void. It simply didn’t return. We don’t know what to do. The Star Gate manual doesn’t cover this eventuality.”

“Run it down for me,” Wentworth snapped.

Cassandra sighed breathily. “Our section has been experiencing some rather disturbing contacts. It manifests itself as what medical professionals classify as sleep paralysis. SP is a REM-sleep parasomnia characterized by unusually vivid paralyzing dreams in which the afflicted party experiences—or imagines—a non-physical intruder in his bedroom. Sometimes he sees

or senses the thing approaching. The intruder is invariably threatening in a malevolent way. Usually the subject feels a crushing and overpowering weight on his chest, but cannot move a muscle. He becomes certain that death is imminent.

“Upon awakening,” continued Cassandra, “the afflicted party is temporarily paralyzed and still caught up in a extremely suffocating terror syndrome. That phase will fade within three to five minutes. The intruder is most often described as an evil black cloud, a shadowy witch or hag, or a dark man. It is never present upon awaken—”

“Dark Man! That sounds like Nyar—”

Cassandra cut him off. “We don’t used the N-word in this building, sir. Against regs.”

“But you know who I mean,” growled Wentworth.

Cassandra nodded. “After two of our viewers were victimized, we went to countermeasures. The problem persisted. It was ultimately determined to take the fight to the enemy.”

“Which enemy?”

“Target N is considered a lower-level entity, as these beings go, so it was deemed an actionable target. And now look at poor Manton.”

Wentworth looked away. “Seal the room until further notice. Generate a full report ASAP.”

“Yes, sir. But what other action do we take? CEES is clearly under assault by outside forces. We can’t stand down without risk of further psychic attacks.”

“Take no action until you hear otherwise,” Wentworth snapped. “And for future reference, don’t use the P-word around me. It’s against my religion.”

Wentworth flew down the stairs. His Lexus slithered out of the lot, nearly running down three teenage girls coming to get their cards read. He cranked the air conditioner up as high as it would go, inwardly praying that the heat wouldn’t break 100 as it did last Halloween.

On his way to NRO HQ, Dr. Wentworth stopped at Holy Thorn Church to light a candle to Saint Andrew. That helped him shake off the tendrils of superstitious unease creeping into his soul. He hurried back to his vehicle, eager for its air-conditioned comfort, and shot north.

* * *

As DDNRO, Dr. Wentworth believed implicitly in science, wholeheartedly subscribed the NRO mission of safeguarding America through a web of recon satellites. He saw himself as one candle dedicated to holding back the eternal night of ignorance.

But as the mission of NRO shifted after its 1992 declassification to include environmental and what were euphemistically called “external” threats—threats from outside time and space—Dr. Wentworth rediscovered the comforts of his childhood Catholicism.

Striding by the sign that read, “The Nation’s Eyes and Ears in Space,” Wentworth passed through three security stations before reaching his office. It was spare and spartan; the only concession to his personal beliefs was a hollow crucifix hanging on the wall containing two short white candles and a tiny bottle of holy oil reserved for Extreme Unction.

In privacy, he familiarized himself with RV protocols, starting with the old Department of Defense definition used during the Star Gate RV program:

“The acquisition, by mental means, of persons, places, and events remote in time and space normally blocked to ordinary perception.”

Two versions had been developed: Coordinate Remote Viewing, which seemed to be almost a form of automatic writing, and Extended Remote Viewing, an adaptation of shamanistic-style out-of-body soul travel. Both depended on the “viewer” being blinded to the true nature of the target, and cued off a set of encrypted coordinates representing a temporary space-time address for the target.

To Wentworth’s skeptical eye, it sounded like so much voodoo....

Sleep paralysis proved to be a recognized medical condition, not previously linked to star-born threats. That much was a relief.

Finally, Wentworth called up a secure file with the cryptic word NYARLATHOTEP. Categorized as an indeterminate threat entity of unknown origin and objectives, Nyarlathotep was first manifested in modern times when a once-obscure writer of pulp horror stories experienced a nightmare centering on this being, so intense and powerful that he got out of bed to transcribe an account of the contact. It was classified as a “contact” because the subject later testified that he began writing his account before fully awakening. That was back in 1920.

Within a month, Nyarlathotep sightings were being reported globally at an average of three per week. For that reason, the Lovecraft experience was retro-classified as a Presumed First Contact.

Wentworth made a nervous sign of the cross after reading that. Then he picked up the phone and speed-dialed CIA.

“Walter? Remember Star Gate? Yeah, that. Know any retired viewers? You do? Put me in contact. Your nation will be grateful.”

* * *

Three hours later, Wentworth was back in the dismal gray room looking down at the still body of NRO Viewer #28, Manton Marrs. The close air was moist and had that attic smell. In accordance with the latest emergency Federal guidelines, the air conditioning was on low to conserve precious power.

“It’s all-gray because it cuts down on the noise-to-signal ratio,” Carl Muirhead was explaining. “Any noise or color perceived before the viewer drops down into an Alpha brainwave state can influence his subsequent perceptions.”

“Skip the technobabble,” Wentworth bit off. “What do you make of him?”

Muirhead noted the placid features, the gently rising and falling gray cotton chest. “Could be stuck in Theta. That’s the bridge between waking Alpha and the Delta sleepstate. Most Extended RV is done in Theta.”

“Can he be unstuck?”

“The brainmind, maybe. But his spirit is out there. *Really* out there.”

“Well, reel him back in.”

Muirhead frowned. “Can’t be done. But possibly I can go out and fetch him.”

Wentworth visibly shook. “Gives me the creeps when you say that....”

Muirhead eyed Cassandra, waiting outside the chamber. “I’ll need the coordinates he was working.”

“I’ll get them.” She departed.

“Coordinates?” Wentworth asked. “What good will they do?”

“All RV is done off coordinates to blind the viewer to the target, so as to inhibit aol—analytic overlay.”

“Say again?”

“Imaginative associations,” Muirhead said softly. “Tell someone to RV the moon and his imagination will paint the moon he knows. But convert that target to a set of encrypted coords, and all he’s got to go on is the data coming off the signal line—the train of signals emanating from the target. It’s how we avoid frontloading.”

“You’ve lost me completely.”

“Sorry. I was with the Star Gate unit for seven years. RV is second-nature to me. The problem here may not be the viewer, but at the target site he was run against. I need to figure out which it is.”

Cassandra returned with a file. “The tasking started with an Open Search Outward,” she supplied. “We couldn’t assume a lone attacker, so we tasked the viewer to go to the central source of the attack. Here is his first session report.”

Muirhead scanned the top page. The coordinates were a set a numbers:

3748

6455

“Pretty sketchy stuff,” he murmured, skimming the session report. “Mostly auditory impressions—pounding drums and anti-coherent music.”

“Inteference was assumed,” she explained. “We then assigned a set of coords to this Matrix address and ran him against it. The first time, he aoled black holes. Then, on the second tasking, he ...”

“Black holes, you say?”

“Yes. On the second tasking, he bounced off the membrane. Hard. Shook him up badly. Had to take the day off.”

Wentworth interrupted, “Membrane? What membrane?”

“In ERV,” Muirhead explained, “the viewer visualizes himself in a safe place in his mind. A sanctuary. Then he creates a vortex in that space, into which he mentally projects himself. It’s actually a quantum-level wormhole. Usually, you can feel your perceptual self going through a membrane at the opposite end before you drop into the target area. If he bounced off, that means a denied area.”

“Denied! By whom?”

“That,” said Carl Muirhead, “is what I’m going to find out.”

“Have you ever dealt with this type of target before?” Cassandra asked quietly.

Muirhead nodded absently. “In training, I worked a target where I found myself on a vast surface marked by a great blue star. There were several robed figures standing guard before a gigantic throne of some dazzling material. No sooner had I perceived them than they approached and ordered me in no uncertain terms to leave.”

“So?” Wentworth snorted.

“So this: I am not a person or even a ghost when I go out there. I’m a point of perception. I can’t be seen by human eyes. But they saw me.”

“What was the target?” Cassandra asked.

“The Throne of God.”

“Jesus Henry Christ!” Wentworth exploded.

“It made a believer out of me,” Muirhead said soberly.

“Believer in what?”

“Everything. That all possibilities are possible, and maybe no possibilities are mutually exclusive, but simultaneously possible.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is—as if the universe is actually a hologram, has some scientists now speculate. Then we have parallel worlds and alternate realities galore.”

“God Almighty created the Universe!” Wentworth snapped back.

Muirhead frowned absently. “Whatever. It’s long-ago created and we have to deal with it on its own terms, not ours.”

“Then I’ll leave you to your voodoo, or whatever it is you do ...”

Wentworth stormed out.

2.

DARK UPPER REGIONS

“HAS ANYONE TRIED CRVING THIS TARGET?” Muirhead asked.

Cassandra opened the top drawer of her cramped office desk. “As a preliminary probe, yes,” she said. “This was the result.”

A half-dozen black rollerball pens spilled onto the desk. They were contorted into various arthritic shapes.

Muirhead picked one up. “Melted?”

“If only. Lab analysis indicates they were reconfigured on the molecular level.”

“Any useful data come out of it?”

“None whatsoever, captain.”

“I’m retired. Call me Carl. Okay, I’ll need a place to cool down.”

“Do you have a cooldown preference?”

Muirhead pulled a CD sleeve from a pocket. “Brought my own mix. Thetawave entrainment track. Pink noise with an embedded binaural beat.”

Cassandra nodded. “Once we find a place to store Viewer #28, you’ll be good to go.”

* * *

An hour later, Carl Muirhead was lying on the gray waterbed listening to the buzzing pink noise fill his brain. He had once been based at the US Amundsen-Scott Research Station in Antarctica, and its harsh serenity appealed to his military mind. He mentally re-created its geodesic dome as his Sanctuary.

While his brain and body cycled down into a receptive brainwave posture, Muirhead mentally paced the cool austere interior, creating an imaginary strongbox into which he cast his fears and concerns. Also, all the frontloading he’d received thus far. In this case, frontloading came with the territory. He’d have to work through it.

In the center of the dome's floor lay a great well. A gray vortex churned in the well. The coordinates were chiseled into the rim. He has set them there as he visualized this space.

When he felt ready, Muirhead would plunge in. But not before. He had to be free of all earthly thoughts.

Even for a seasoned viewer, the line between the imaginal and the operational is a treacherous blur. So when his strongbox started to rattle, Carl Muirhead ignored it as an artifact of an active rather than receptive imagination.

It refused to settle down. Mentally, he unlocked it. Out popped something black and rubbery, sporting an eggplant-blank ovoid instead of a featured head. It flung a long-handled spear at him.

Muirhead went to White Light. The spear vaporized upon contact with his expanded aura.

With an angry whipping of its snaky black tail, the ebony entity retreated down the churning well.

Boosting his auric field, Muirhead stepped to the rim and plunged in.

The sensation of falling was long and pleasant. When he hit the membrane, it was a surprise. He bounced back. Taking another run at it, he struck hard and rebounded.

The third time, it passed him through with no more sensation than a finger going through a soap bubble.

Rolling upon impact, he found his metaphysical feet. That was RV Rule #1.

Rule #2 was to keep moving. It was the only way to perceptually turn undifferentiated waves into recognizable particles. His recon was spiral. Nothing was manifested, so Muirhead expanded his scope.

A face flashed briefly. An ovoid head, sharp bat ears, and absolutely no features. It was lost almost as quickly as perceived.

The area seemed cavernous. Drums, or something that reverberated like drums, crept into his conscious awareness, pulling him toward their maddening cacophony.

Muirhead resisted. The thrumming tug persisted. He pulled back. The tugging tones grew tormented, insistent.

Although he had left his physical body back in the gray room, Carl Muirhead could feel his heart-rate accelerate. A creeping panic was setting

in. The tug turned into tendrils of terror.

He gave himself the mental command: *Return to Sanctuary.*

For a panicky beat, nothing happened. A cold blackness seemed to be creeping over him. The drums swelled. A weird piping started up, wilder than Pan at his most manic.

Then, abruptly, he was back in Sanctuary.

And something infinitely black and manlike was rising out of the well....

He seemed to be dreaming. Strangely, he knew he was dreaming. Carl Muirhead lay in the womblike gray chamber, but something was wrong—horribly wrong. The geometry. It was impossible. He was enclosed in a sealed place. Although he could remember coming to this room, suddenly it made no sense that he could be enclosed. It was against the very laws he knew—or thought he knew.

There were no corners or angles in this round sealed space. Yet somehow, something was extruding out of a high round spot that was akin to a corner.

It was small and black—intensely black. A cloud. It possessed no face, yet it looked at him with such malevolence he could imagine a visage of incalculably unutterable evil.

A harsh voice spoke:

“Death is all around you! Your eyes! Your eyes!”

He could not move. He could not breathe. He lay paralyzed, a helpless morsel for the nasty black cloud that stealthily slipped toward him like a formless spider descending a web.

Remembering his training, he shot it with White Light.

Shocked, the dark thing retreated from view. It was that easy.

Abruptly, Muirhead was awake. He sat up, heart racing. There was no cloud. Nothing. The geometry of the room seemed perfectly normal now.

Yet he remembered clearly how it had been. For a frightening moment, his mind attempted to reconcile two utterly opposed views of reality. Then it all faded like a dream....

* * *

“What the hell happened?” Cassandra asked anxiously.

Muirhead sat up. He was drenched in a strange sweat. "I must have Deltaed out. I returned to Sanctuary, and suddenly I was dreaming. A black cloud zeroed in on me—"

"You've been hagged."

"What?"

"Hagged. Newfoundland folk term for sleep paralysis-style demon assault. The fear will pass very quickly. Breathe normally."

"Fear? That was sheer terror." Muirhead lay back down. "There's something else. I can't seem to recall what..."

"It will come back if you relax. Please compose your session report while the data is still fresh in your mind."

She departed hastily.

* * *

"Your session report clearly describes a night-gaunt," Cassandra was saying thirty minutes later.

"I'm unfamiliar with the term," Muirhead admitted.

"An even lower order of entity than Target N." She frowned. "Do you recall what you had forgotten?"

"No. It's at the periphery of my consciousness, but still eluding me."

Cassandra frowned. "I think the next session should be monitored."

"Fair enough."

"Carl, are you familiar with the soul retrieval concept? I think what happened to Manton calls for such a procedure."

Muirhead frowned. "I've done a lot of non-local operations, but I've never done that."

"Have you ever had a spiritual experience during RV?"

"Once. Never forgot it, either."

"Good. Then you'll understand what I'm driving at. A human being at our level of vibration is capable of making contact with a disembodied consciousness. That will be your tasking. To locate viewer Manton Marrs. Are you okay with that?"

"No guarantees," he reminded.

"Not even that you'll come back," Cassandra said flatly.

Muirhead stood up. "I want to bulletproof the next session before I jump back in."

"How?"

"Don't know. But there's got to be a way."

"Fine. This time tomorrow."

"Done. See you then."

"On your way out," Cassandra called after him, "you might want to get a reading. On the house. Forewarned is forearmed."

"It's a thought," said Muirhead.

"I recommend Kim."

Kim was blonde and almost no help. Her eyes skipped over the Tarot card spread. "There's something you've forgotten."

"I know. Can you tell me what it is?"

Kim couldn't. "I can't seem to grab an image. I feel blocked."

Muirhead sighed. "I know exactly how you feel..."

3.

PRESENT AND UNACCOUNTED FOR

LYING IN BED THAT NIGHT, CARL MUIRHEAD FELT blocked too. His mind kept jumping to those last few minutes in Sanctuary, just before he fell into that surreal space where Euclidean geometry ceased to be relevant. There was a missing memory there, but he still couldn't access it.

He didn't remember drifting off, but knew he was dreaming. He did not know how he knew, nor how it was possible to know that he was dreaming. But he knew.

A black faceless figure stood at the foot of his bed. Tall, lean, radiating incalculable power, it gazed down at him with a weird combination of malevolence and contempt, even though it possessed no discernible orbs.

—*I am come again*, it communicated. The words rang in Muirhead's mind, not his ears. For the tall black entity possessed no mouth either.

Muirhead's question was non-vocal. A thoughtball. —*What?*

—*All knowledge you desire I possess*, it returned.

—*What are you?*

—*Am I not magnificent?*

—*Huh?*

—*Do you fail to behold me?*

A sucking sensation took Carl Muirhead by the feet and his consciousness spun crazily and without direction.

He did not know where he was in time or space, but something like a black organic egg swallowed him. Flaps closed over his head and he felt as if he were in a womb. Not his mother's womb, but something both familiar and alien. It seemed as if he were suspended in a warm jellylike substance.

A soothing disembodied voice pulsed. —*You are safe here.*

—*What are you?* returned Muirhead.

—*God.*

—*God!*

—The god of this sector. I am named Nyarlathotep by him who created me.

—Who created you?

—He whose name is Love.

—God Almighty created you! Muirhead thought back, stunned. *—For what insane purpose?*

—To fulfill my destiny, as will all creation.

—What is—

—You have opened the door for me, the mighty mind of Nyarlathotep interrupted. —Therefore, I will permit you to enter Ultimate Chaos to retrieve the entity you seek. I offer no other guarantees.

Carl Muirhead abruptly woke up. Terror was high in his throat. His heart pounded. Jerking awake and up, he expected to behold Nyarlathotep, but there was nothing there but a dark emptiness that reverberated like a lingering presence....

* * *

Cassandra picked up on the second ring. “Yes?”

“I made contact,” Muirhead reported. “Target N. They’ve been wrong about him since day one. He’s not a low-level entity, but a sector god. Probably has dominion over this solar system. Maybe the whole damn Milky Way.”

“That’s useful Intel.”

“But here’s the bad news. I remember what I couldn’t before. He followed me back through the wormhole. He’s on Earth now.”

The silence on the line was electric. “Are you ... certain?”

Muirhead hesitated. Feeling a suffocating constriction at his throat, he clawed at the collar of his sweat-soaked pajama top, only to discover that he had it on backwards. He had not gone to sleep that way.

“Dead certain,” he said thickly.

Neither one spoke for a long time. Finally Carl Muirhead said, “I’ll see you at the agreed-upon time,” and hung up.

Sleep eluded him till dawn. Instead, he danced in the Theta state, getting physical rest but no mental peace. He was trained to do that.

* * *

The morning was spent going over every CEES datafile on Nyarlathotep.

“Interesting that this H. P. Lovecraft should have dreamed or channeled such a name,” Cassandra was saying. “It means ‘Nyarlat comes in peace,’ or possibly ‘is satisfied.’ Doubtful he would know that.”

“Listen to the first paragraph,” Muirhead put in, “the one he wrote before he fully woke up: ‘Nyarlathotep ... the crawling chaos ... I am the last ... I will tell the audient void....’”

“Audient means listening. That’s a pretty advanced concept for a pulp horror writer.”

“He channeled this, unwitting,” Muirhead decided. “Records of his dream-life show the usual indicators of an emergent psychic. Lucid dreaming. Astral encounters. Nature spirit visions. Hypersensitivities to assorted stimuli. The works.”

“I’ll buy that,” Cassandra said. “But what does this story tell us?”

“That Target N is a sector god, and a harbinger for the end of the world, if not the galaxy. His advent on Earth will mark a kind of metacosmic Ragnarok.”

“Or trigger it.”

“Let’s not go there....” Muirhead wrinkled his brow. “Suppose that all these reports of sleep paralysis are in fact artifacts of Target N attempting to enter our plane. These black clouds. There’s nothing like them in mythology or literature. They’re not Jungian in nature. If they’re part of the collective unconscious, they don’t pop up except in SP experiences. They invariably induce profound terror. Ancestral memories of thunderstorms would not evoke a cold cosmic fear.”

“Lovecraft used that exact term,” Cassandra murmured. “Cosmic fear. He reported multiple REM sleep nightmares of profound terror. Even pre-pubescent night-gaunt attacks. It’s starting to sound as if he suffered from SP before it was a documented medical condition.”

Muirhead leaned back in his chair and stared off into thoughtful space. “Nyarlathotep has been trying to invade Earth since this crypto-sensitive Lovecraft first summoned him out of the void. These clouds may be what Lovecraft called the crawling chaos. If he’s loose, we’ve got to find a way to put this big black genie back into its bottle.”

“How?”

“Maybe Manton Marrs can tell us,” Muirhead mused softly.

Cassandra’s violet eyes deepened in hue. “Are you ready to go in, Carl?”

“Yeah,” Muirhead said, loosening his shirt collar absently. “And I think I know how I’m getting back if I run into trouble out there.”

“Care to share?”

“No. The Ether has ears.”

* * *

The pink noise buzzed insistently in his headphones as Carl Muirhead sank from Beta to Alpha to Theta. It was a drowsy feeling, yet his heart pounded high in his chest and his palms perspired profusely as if his pores had let go completely.

The coordinates were etched in the rim of the Vortex well once he reached Sanctuary. Methodically, he went through the standard protocols, then jumped into the swirling gray Vortex.

The membrane passed him through, and Carl Muirhead began tracking through a superblack realm in which drums pounded at some near distance. He had the sensation of things in engaged random motion—wild, unseeable, yet perceptible on a sensory level divorced from the organ-based human senses. It brought to mind a swirling blackness, if an unrelieved blackness could be perceived to swirl.

He recalled the frenetic final lines of Lovecraft’s story:

And through this revolting graveyard of the universe the muffled, maddening beating of drums, and thin, monotonous whine of blasphemous flutes from inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time; the detestable pounding and piping whereunto dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic, tenebrous ultimate gods—the blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles whose soul is Nyarlathotep.

Somewhere back in Earth reality, his body shuddered in sympathy with his dislocated mind.

Mentally, Muirhead sent out the name Manton Marrs. If this was a typical thought-responsive other-dimensional environment, his focused intention would take him directly to his objective.

It did. Instantaneously. Manton Marrs was a disembodied energy signature, but one that was recognizable. And responsive.

—*Manton?* he probed.

—*Yes.* The energy coming back felt dismal and depleted. Muirhead moved toward it. He was confronted by a wall—a medium resembling a mass of gray gelatin. The essence of Manton Marrs was fixed in this like a wasp in amber. Muirhead sensed others as well, arrayed dimly behind him.

—*Come back,* he signaled. —*I’ve been sent to bring you back. Come back with me.*

The return signal was weak. —*Cannot... Unable.*

—*Connect with my energy. I know a way to return.*

—*No point... Nothing to return to ... anymore.*

—*What do you mean, Manton?*

—*Nyarlahotep ... Dark Redeemer ... Crawling Chaos ... approaching ... Sothis Radiant ... Rapture ... Ragnarok ... All are One ...*

—*What?* Muirhead pressed.

—*No hope... It’s all ... scheduled for demo—*

—*For what?* Muirhead pressed. —*I don’t understand.*

A picture came to mind. A big black ball swinging on the end of an iron chain. A wrecking ball. It came toward him, causing him to flinch instinctively.

—*I understand,* Carl Muirhead thought back. He felt cold. The background drumming seemed to swell. A thin piping noise joined it, and he knew his time was short.

—*One last question, Manton. What do you know about Nyarlahotep that will help me change the future?*

—*Created by ... Love ...*

—*You mean God?*

—*God is Love ...*

—*That makes no sense.*

—*Nothing makes sense when you correlate the All...*

The dread piping drew nearer, and Carl Muirhead gave himself the command to return to Sanctuary. Nothing happened. He was not surprised. The drums boomed more loudly, and the flutes grew eager. He tuned them out and began chanting a desperate numerical sequence.

* * *

Muirhead came out of it, drenched in a chilly second skin of perspiration. The room felt warm in a claustrophobic way. The reassuring hum of the air conditioner was absent. Another power failure. They were a daily occurrence these days....

He rolled off the gray waterbed, saying thickly, "Better euthanize the remains. Manton Marrs isn't coming back."

Cassandra asked, "You found him?"

Muirhead shook his head. He could still feel that damnable drumming in his bones. "Wish I hadn't. He told me there would be nothing to come back to."

"I don't want to hear that!" Cassandra snapped. "I have children."

Muirhead found his legs. They were unsteady under him. "I almost didn't make it back myself."

"But you did. That means hope. We have hope." She handed him a tall glass of icewater. "Tell me we have hope."

Muirhead sipped slowly before replying. "The coordinates always take you to the target. I learned that early on. Before I went out, I gave myself a second set of coords, 0001/0001."

"Meaning?"

Muirhead took another slow sip. "Ground zero. The place from where I started. Not Sanctuary, which is no longer inviolate, but my own body. Reverse coordinates. They carried me back."

"Brilliant! No one's ever thought of that before."

"There's something else no one has ever thought of before."

"What?"

"Let's get Wentworth in on this. He has an absolute need to now."

4.

BEYOND ALL NIGHT

FIFTY-TWO MINUTES LATER, CARL MUIRHEAD WAS making his report. He covered everything that had transpired over the last twenty-four hours and finished with, “I think I understand what is meant by the assertion that Nyarlathotep was created by Love.”

“I don’t believe that the Good Lord would create such an abomination,” Wentworth insisted hotly.

“Hear me out. It’s complicated. A theory has been gaining ground in scientific circles for the last decade or so. The holographic theory of the universe. It postulates an explicate order—outer reality—what we see and experience in life, and a hidden vibrational realm, underlying it. The implicate order, which is the true ground of all reality.”

The scientific side of Dr. Wentworth kicked in. “Go on,” he said flatly.

“This ground, whether you call it the subatomic or the imaginal realm, is essentially consciousness—pure and undifferentiated. Like the quantum field, it manifests itself as our reality of disparate elements, but fundamentally it is one thing. A Plenum that is also a Void, empty and full at the same time. The ultimate contradiction. It’s been called the Frequency Domain. The Audient Void, as Lovecraft dubbed it.”

“I don’t follow,” Wentworth said slowly.

“Azathoth ...” Cassandra breathed wonderingly. “Now we know ...”

Muirhead nodded. “In other words, all things in the universe are one thing manifesting itself as many things. It’s all one Matrix. The early RV pioneers discovered this, but it wasn’t part of our national-security mission, so that insight was kept within the Unit. No need to know for the civilian world.”

“Go on,” Wentworth urged.

“Nyarlathotep is an artifact of the implicate order, an issue of Azathoth, from which all reality springs. Now he’s loose on our level. He has one

objective: to bring our local reality to a close. Why, we don't know. But that's his mission in the explicate order: to fold it back into the implicate order. To *uncreate* it."

"And you think you brought him here?" Wentworth prodded.

Muirhead winced. "Inadvertently."

"But if the world is near the End Times, there's still Jesus."

Muirhead thinned his lips. "I don't know that," he said at last.

"It says so in the Bible. Have you ever read your Bible?"

"It's not my Bible, sir," Muirhead said stiffly. "But I would like to venture a working hypothesis. It is this: nothing was known of Target N until H. P. Lovecraft evidently channeled a brief piece of writing describing how he would come out of Egypt during a time of tribulation and augur the end of life as we know it. Such a time would be marked by political upheavals and unusual heat."

"And the ice caps are melting," Wentworth said thickly.

"Yes, the ice caps are melting. We're deep in October and it feels like August. But hear me out. One element of the theory is that all minds are one mind, and godlike in their capacity to create reality. We now know that as individuals, bubbled off from our Source, we exist disconnected from our innate divinity."

"I don't buy this line of thinking," Wentworth snapped. "There's only one deity, indivisible ..."

"As individuated sparks of the godhead," Muirhead went on steadily, "we can sometimes manifest miracles unconsciously. Specific examples are innumerable and range from drawing long-lost objects back to us through synchronic chains of events to poltergeist-class telekinesis."

"Superstition!" spat Wentworth.

"He's going somewhere with this, sir," Cassandra inserted. "Please hear him out."

Wentworth subsided. He was sweating profusely now.

"I have been told twice that 'Love' is the creator of Nyarlathotep. We have so far assumed that meant God. For 'God is Love' is a recurrent tenet of all major religions."

Muirhead paused. He let the statement hang in the still hot air.

"Suppose what was meant wasn't God Almighty, as in a divine creator being, but a particular spark of that supposed entity? One highly

imaginative although bizarre spark. An eccentric unique among his kind.”

Wentworth frowned. “I don’t quite follow.”

“Suppose Nyarlathotep was the product of the powerful unconscious mind of a long-dead writer of cosmic horror stories, Howard Philips Lovecraft. Suppose he didn’t merely channel Nyarlathotep. What if he *created* him, and all his train? The Ultimate Gods, Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth. What if Lovecraft was powerful enough to create these dark forces he wrote about, and one of them has come to sweep the Earth—if not the galaxy—of all life?”

“Dear sweet Jesus!” Wentworth exploded.

Cassandra began sobbing raggedly.

Muirhead went on dully. “We can’t jam the genie back in the bottle because the one who created him, and the only one powerful enough to constrain Nyarlathotep and his intentions, lies dead in his grave. And once created nothing can be uncreated. At least, not by us.”

“This is a joke,” Wentworth choked out.

“A cosmic joke,” Muirhead corrected. “On humanity. I once had an encounter out there that proved—”

“Let me tell you,” Wentworth interrupted savagely. “It will take more than a wild-ass theory to shake my faith in a living God. I believe in the Rapture and the Resurrection. It’s been promised to us. Two thousand years of Christianity can’t be wrong.”

“One worshipper’s Rapture is another man’s Ragnarok,” Muirhead said. “Out there, Manton used the term ‘Dark Redeemer.’ I think he meant Nyarlathotep.”

Wentworth bristled. “I’d have a see a sign before I swallow—”

Cassandra vented a sudden shriek. A shaking finger pointed past Wentworth’s head. All eyes tracked it.

On the wall was nailed a crucifix. Where the Savior of Men had formerly hung in agony was a lean black figure, head smooth as an eggplant, a spiked tail enwrapped about its left leg.

“There’s your sign,” Carl Muirhead said softly. “Nyarlathotep Comes in Peace from beyond the Audient Void.”

“My God!” Cassandra breathed. “It makes sense. The Void is listening for ... what?”

“For Nyarlathotep to visit his final peace on us all,” Muirhead said. “Just as the Greeks invented their gods to avoid facing the horror of primal chaos, the ancients created Jesus to mask the true myth of the one who will return at the End of Days.”

Dr. Wentworth straightened his Princeton tie, wiped a suddenly cold sweat mustache off his upper lip and cracked, “Excuse me.”

After he stepped into his private bathroom, a loud report was heard. There was no accompanying sound of a fall, but very soon a flow of blood began to seep out from under the door sill.

“We’re done here,” Muirhead said quietly. “We’re done everywhere. Everything is. Marrs said we were scheduled for demolition. He couldn’t have been more clear.”

Cassandra clutched at the armrests of her chair. “But my children!”

“Won’t exist much longer. Nothing will.”

She came out of her seat like a tigress, spitting her words savagely. “But—what do we do? We can’t just not *do* anything!”

“There’s nothing to be done. Once it’s all dissolved back into the quantum field, it won’t matter. There won’t be any more of any of us. It will be as if we never existed.”

“But—”

“If it’s not today or this month or this year, then next year,” Muirhead went on raggedly. “It’s only a matter of when and how they want to do it.”

“Are you even human? We have to stand up. We must! The race. Think of the human race. Future generations!”

Muirhead stared off into space. “Don’t you understand? We can’t stop Nyarlathotep. We *are* Nyarlathotep. All of us. We *are one with Nyarlathotep!*”

“I refuse to accept this! I won’t! I won’t! I won’t!”

“Remember my visit to the Throne of God? I didn’t tell you the whole story. It was empty, Cassandra. No one sat there. No one ever had.”

“No, no, no ...”

“I decided to go back,” Muirhead continued sadly. “To make sure I understood the experience. I went out there and I beheld the face of God. It was radiant, as if it were composed of electrons. I approached. And as I approached, whatever energy composed the face of God separated, the way stars in a galaxy would separate if you flew through it. The face of God was

like the face of the man in the Moon—an illusion. It wasn't there after you got close to it. Behind it, I saw in the underlying reality ... others ..."

"What others?"

"Other gods or beings, or what have you. They were exactly what Lovecraft described. Blind cosmic godlets, mindless and ignorant. I didn't understand then what they symbolized. I do now."

Cassandra was moaning in a low, inarticulate way. Her grief could not find utterance.

Muirhead kept on. "The earliest minds in the universe must have created them before the religions took hold. Before the concept of One God took root in civilized societies. By that time, it was too late. Just as we create our earthly reality today, they created the Ultimate Gods in the eons long before anyone knew better, just as Lovecraft accidentally created Nyarlathotep, adding to the primal inchoate chaos the Greeks said predated the rise of the Olympian gods, which they imagined because the truth was too terrible to contemplate." He bowed his head. "There are no gods. No one Creator. There is just the Audient Void of unconscious creation, and since no governing mind, no overriding spiritual authority exists, what was created was absolute chaos. Ultimate Chaos. The crawling chaos. It's been crawling for untold trillions of kalpas, and will continue to crawl long after Nyarlathotep finally dismantles this segment of creation."

Cassandra buried her face in her hands. "Don't. I—"

"It's no use, Cassandra. I've correlated my experiences. That's where they lead ..."

Night had finished falling. A nearly full moon was coming up over a stand of trees. It was breathtakingly big. A pure effulgence seeped through the closed office window. It made one almost feel hope.

"We should go now," Muirhead muttered. "They'll be looking for him soon."

Quietly, they exited the NRO building in Chantilly, Virginia, and reclaimed Muirhead's Honda CR-V. The early evening heat was oppressive. They got into the vehicle like the dead climbing into their coffins. Words rose in their throats, only to die unborn and unuttered.

Muirhead started the engine. Suddenly it was very dark. *Too* dark.

"Where is it!" Cassandra cried, craning her neck upward.

“Where is what?” Then Muirhead made the connection. It was hard not to. The rising moon had been coming up over the trees, limning them so that the branches resembled spectral cobwebs of wood. But now it was no longer there. A clear night sky was gathering early stars. No cloud obscured them. But where had hung the moon was simply a void.

“The moon couldn’t just ... vanish ...” Cassandra moaned, thick-voiced.

Muirhead scanned the skies. His voice came ragged as cloth. “It didn’t. It’s still there. You just can’t see it. It’s been doused.”

“Doused? Doused? What are you trying to—” From the glove compartment, she grabbed a flashlight and shone it upward in a foolish effort to locate the lunar orb.

“Please get hold of yourself,” Muirhead said gently. “The moon reflects light, remember? The light of the sun. We can’t see the moon because it has nothing to reflect.”

The flashlight fell from her impotent hand. “The sun ...”

Muirhead released a long sigh of complete surrender. “On the other side of the Earth,” he said wistfully, “they’re probably witnessing it firsthand. But we’re fortunate. We have time to say our goodbyes. Not that they matter ...”

“Ridiculous! The moon’s gone behind a cloud, that’s all. We’re jumping at clouds and shadows.”

Muirhead keyed the engine. “A cloud would be visible. And would block out the stars, too.”

Unnoticed, a blue-white star flared out of existence low on the horizon. Another followed. Then two more. The entire Milky Way was winking out, soundless and unexpected, dissolving back into the undifferentiated quantum soup from which it first emerged.

Cassandra scanned the heavens. “I ... I don’t see Mars. Or Venus.”

“Dead worlds with nothing to reflect, just like Earth....”

Muirhead drove in silence, eyes stony. Above him the unlit lamp of night continued to rise, perhaps for the last time. No human eye could see it, but Carl Muirhead saw it clearly in his hyper-receptive mind. It was round and black and featureless like the mocking mask of Nyarlathotep....

Deep in his skull, he felt the subauditory vibration of relentless drums, beating, beating, beating the dark music of Ragnarok.

In the Event of Death

SIMON STRANTZAS

Simon Strantzas is the author of Beneath the Surface (Humdrumming, 2008), Cold to the Touch (Tartarus Press, 2009), Nightingale Songs (Dark Regions Press, 2011), and Burnt Black Suns (Hippocampus Press, 2014). He is the editor of Shadows Edge (Gray Friar Press, 2013). His fiction has appeared in The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror and The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror, and has been nominated for the British Fantasy Award. He lives with his wife in Toronto, Canada.

THERE WERE MORE PAPERBACK BOOKS IN MY MOTHER'S house than I realized. Pocket-sized, well-thumbed, all with yellowed covers of swashbuckling men and bodiced damsels, they were lurid reminders of a habit that dated back forever. I knew they took up a single shelf, but not boxes beneath her stairs, or shelves in her garage, or crates in her attic. The house overflowed with them, spilling from every corner and nook. So many books, so intricate a reflection of her life, and her own struggles to escape.

"What are you going to do with them?" Wanda asked as I filled another box.

"I have no idea," I said.

"Do you think you'll sell them?"

I shook my head. "I don't know if I could."

The answer seemed to satisfy her, though I wondered if she understood what I meant. Then I wondered the same about myself.

It had been fewer than two days since my mother's death, but I had not yet had a chance to grieve. There were too many things that needed to be done, too many arrangements to be made, and only me to do them. Wanda helped as much as time allowed, but her job at the hospital was the only thing supporting us as I worked on my novel, and we couldn't afford her missing a single shift, not if we were to afford the funeral. I'd managed to put the bulk of the arrangements into place, but I needed to choose a dress for my mother to wear and I didn't feel strong enough alone.

I hadn't taken Wanda to the house before, afraid of letting her see where I'd grown up in case it altered the way she felt about me. I knew it made no sense, but there were so many complicated emotions stored within those walls that I failed to see how she could avoid being changed by it all. The house practically vibrated as we stood there.

Wanda walked from room to room, my mother's death transforming the place from house to museum, picking up and inspecting items as she did so. Along the mantle was a series of photographs. Wanda studied them, then looked at me.

"Where's your father?"

I shrugged. It was a question I'd asked in different ways my entire life. My father had died of some illness shortly before I was born, and my

mother had nothing more to say about it. She had no photographs of him, never spoke his name or acknowledged he had existed, and yet it was clear that she had loved him dearly. I had once gone so far as to ask my Aunt Renée about what had happened, but my question caused her to cross herself vehemently and scold me for not minding my own business. My mother had always been overly protective—her worry when I had terrible nightmares as a child only made them worse, and as a teenager I had to rebel before I could escape her smothering arms—so for years I believed there was some deep secret to his absence and her silence. As I grew older I quietly realized that sometimes there are wounds that never heal, and pressing only causes them more pain. I decided if it was easier for my mother to forget, I wasn't going to keep reminding her.

Wanda and I went through her closets slowly, looking for the right item. Had it been up to me I would have picked the first thing I found, but Wanda was more careful. She knew better what my mother liked, what she thought she looked her best in. I didn't argue, happy to have one burden lifted from me, though all the same worried that one less distraction meant my grief took one step closer.

As my wife pulled down another shoe box from the closet's top shelf, an envelope came free and fluttered to her feet. She bent down and picked it up. Reading the front, she frowned.

"It's addressed to you."

The envelope felt lifelessly thin, and printed beneath my name in my mother's hand was: TO BE OPENED IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH. In my mind's eye I traveled to the past to watch her carefully scripting those words, and the vision was too much to bear. It took a few minutes and my wife's arms around my neck before I was able to break the seal.

I don't know what I'd hoped to find. The letter was prefaced by a few painful words urging me not to cry or miss her, followed a list of instructions letting me know where she kept her banking information and how best to access matters of her estate. None of this surprised me: my mother had been a practical woman and remained so until the end. It was reassuring, in its own way. She concluded the list with two requests. The first was that her entire collection of paperbacks be delivered to my Aunt Renée who, despite how I might have felt about her, had been her closest

friend since childhood; the second was that I never read the diary she kept in her nightstand drawer. To be certain, she wanted it buried with her.

Despite my hopes, there was nothing in the letter revealing the mystery of my father's death.

Behind me was the infamous nightstand. I had memories of tracing the patterns carved in its legs with my finger while my mother folded laundry or read one of her novels. It was a piece of furniture I knew very well, yet never once did I realize it had a drawer until I took a closer look. History makes us blind. History, and time.

I gently rocked the handle and slid the small drawer out. Inside was yet another paperback novel, *Lord Vanity*, bookmark halfway between its rich covers of scarlet and gold, and lying beneath it a small diary with a brown faux leather cover. Its pages sealed with a flimsy lock.

"You aren't going to read it, are you?" Wanda asked me. The horror she felt was folded into her face.

"Of course not," I said, though I could not deny my curiosity. If my mother had written at all about my father, wouldn't it have been there? Part of me wanted to scour its pages, but the rest was terrified. I had spent so many years blanketed by her worry that I couldn't disobey her final wish, even if it meant the answers to all my questions.

Assuming they were answers I wasn't too frightened to read.

* * *

I pulled myself out of bed the next morning, the funeral still a day away, and drove an hour to Maple to see my Aunt Renée. I went alone, my wife deciding she'd rather nurse her unhappiness in front of a piano than endure another painful visit. Instead, boxes of old paperbacks kept me company, filling the car with a musty tangy odor. It smelled of the past.

I had other motives for the trip beyond delivering the boxes, most of them centering around the revelation of my mother's diary. It raised questions I hoped my aunt could answer.

It took time for my Aunt Renée to answer her door, and when she did her face was puffed and tear-streaked. She didn't smile.

"Oh, it's you," she said, and walked off. I took that as invitation to follow.

My aunt's house was larger than both my mother's and my own, and yet felt cramped with all the items shelved along the walls and piled in the corners. I had never liked the place as a child—it was dark and oppressive, its strange atmosphere repellent. She rarely seemed to open her blinds, and the giant shrine to her savior that dominated the front room wall left me uneasy.

"This is it?" she asked, staring in the box of paperbacks I carried.

"The rest are in the car. She wanted you to have them."

She shuffled through the box.

"You didn't have to bring them today."

"No, I suppose not. But I thought I might as well. It gave me a reason to come up and see how you were."

She snickered. "How do you *think* I am? How are *you*? Just peachy, I'd guess?"

I smiled as gently as I could.

"I'm doing okay," I said. "It's tough, but I'm doing a little better than I thought I'd be."

She made a disapproving noise but said nothing. Instead, she pulled books out of the box one at a time and set each on the table.

"Are you still writing your satanic stories?"

I looked down at my hands. The back of one carried tiny indentations, as though fingernails had been pressed into the soft flesh. The pale color slowly gave way to red; I tried rubbing away the discoloration with my thumb.

"They're only stories, Aunt Renée. They don't mean anything. Most of them aren't even trying to be scary. They're just about how people feel."

She looked up from the half-empty box and squinted.

"That's how the demons start. They make you think it's nothing at first, and maybe it is, but once they get their talons in you they sink and sink." Her hands were up, fingers curled in shriveled claws and pressed against her chest. "Before you know it, you're doing the demons' work on God's earth for all eternity." She stopped and looked back into the box.

"Where's her diary?" she said.

I was glad for the change in topic.

"I was going to ask you about that. I didn't even know she had a diary until her note said so. But she asked me not to read it. Just to put it with her

in the coffin. But what if it mentions my father? All I know about him was that he was sick, but not what he had or what he was like. I need answers, Aunt Renée, and this might be my only chance. Yet, the note ...”

“What’s this about a note?” My aunt held out her free hand. “Let me see it.”

“I—I don’t have it with me.” I stumbled. “Why would you need to see it?”

“I should ask you the same thing. You don’t need to see anything. Especially that diary. Bring it to me as well.”

“Why? What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to burn it.”

“What?”

I was horrified. Then her face transformed into a cauldron of hate and she seethed, “That diary—it’s evil and must not be allowed to exist. I would have done it years ago if your mother told me she still had it.”

“It’s her diary,” I said. “There’s nothing evil about it.”

“You’re a fool. You can’t possibly be so ignorant. Not when you are already doing *his* bidding. You need to wise up and take the Lord into your heart. He’ll help you vanquish the evil.”

I didn’t know how to respond.

“Aunt Renée, I’m not going to disrespect your religious beliefs, but—”

“Your being here, in my house, disrespects them. You’re family, and your mother has just passed, so I’m making an exception. But don’t misunderstand ...” Her voice became intensely quiet; I could feel it crawling up my spine. “Your mother may not have seen it in time, but I do. You’re your father’s son. And I pray every night an angel will come and deliver you. It’s been the angel of death twice before. Maybe you’ll get lucky. The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

Her words hung in the air. What she said, what she implied—I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but as the seconds passed I realized she was right. I was being a fool.

“I’ll leave the rest of the boxes, Aunt Renée, then I’m going. After the funeral, you won’t have to worry about seeing me ever again.”

My aunt’s eyes betrayed her anger as she watched me unload the rest of the boxes from the trunk of my car and drop them in her front hallway. I did so silently, waiting for an apology even though I knew none would come.

And she did not disappoint me. In fact, it wasn't until I was done and made the mistake of looking at her that she finally spoke.

"Get out of here," she said. "Don't you ever bring your demons back here."

"Gladly," I said, storming toward the door. As I pulled my car out of her driveway I saw her on the porch. She looked withered under the bleached light.

"I'd pray for you," she called out. "But you don't deserve it."

* * *

My tongue was sour as I drove, a nauseating shiver of adrenaline bubbling beneath my skin. When I arrived home, my poor wife had to listen to my hatred erupt for nearly an hour, the red heat of it spewing out, and no matter how much I said or for how long it never seemed to end. It was unquenchable, and only my eventual exhaustion slowed me enough for Wanda to interrupt.

"I found something," she said. "While you were—while you were out. I found something in the boxes we brought back from your mother's. Though I'm not sure if this is the best time to show you."

"Show me," I said. "It couldn't make my day any worse."

"I don't know if *worse* is quite the word for it," she said, then opened up a dresser drawer and produced a stack of paper fastened with a blue elastic band. "I thought you'd want to see these, especially in light of your afternoon."

I took the pile from her and without removing the elastic flipped through the first few pages. When I realized what she'd found, I looked up. She nodded.

"It's more poetry. Look, they're dated. They were written sometime before you were born."

"Why didn't I know any of this? Why did she hide it from me?"

"I don't know, but Dan—"

"Do you think—" Everything rushed through my head; I couldn't keep my thoughts straight. "Was she embarrassed? Did my aunt say something to dissuade her? I bet—"

"Dan!"

She startled me and I stopped talking.

“Dan, before you do anything you should read some of them. Some of the poems.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, then paused. “Nothing’s wrong. I just think you should read them.”

I skimmed the first poem in the pile.

The word that came to mind was *nightmarish*, but in its truest sense. Reading her poetry was reading a nightmare on the page—an actual nightmare. It lacked any discernible narrative, rather inundating me with corrupted images, flashes of that which lurked deep within my subconscious. Men in tailcoats and creatures with long tails slithered over one another. Words mixed and intertwined on the page in uncomfortable juxtaposition. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen, worse than the strangest weird fiction I’d ever encountered, and afterward it was unclear if what I remembered was real or a fevered dream. A dozen stories sprung to life in my inspired mind.

“What do you make of them?” Wanda asked. “Are they your mother’s?”

“They have to be,” I said, wiping my dry mouth. “I recognize her handwriting. But I don’t understand why her poetry was such a secret.”

Wanda was surprised.

“I think it’s pretty obvious why she didn’t show them to you or to anyone else. They’re vile.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw your face. You know exactly what I mean.”

I touched the ink on the page. Even it was beautiful.

“But what was wrong with them? Nothing vulgar or crass. Nothing profane, as far as I can see. I don’t remember much beyond a few images, but they seemed like science fiction. Was there something about aliens? And maybe a name ... Varshni, or something? I remember an old clock ...”

Wanda crossed her arms as though cold.

“I don’t like them, Dan. It’s as simple as that. Get rid of them.”

“But they’re my mother’s,” I said, stunned I was emitting the words. “I can’t just—I mean won’t just—”

She put up her hand.

“Just keep them in your office, then. Away from me.”

That much I could promise.

* * *

For the first night since my mother's death, my dreams weren't filled with memories of her. Instead, she was displaced by images from her poetry, and they made little sense as they played over and over against the inside of my skull, trapping me in a perpetual state of half-conscious delirium. My droning hallucinations were vivid, teasing the revelation of things that lay beyond my perception. I rose from bed bound by frustration, worried my incessant turning would wake Wanda, and in my hazy stupor I decided to creep across the dark house to my office. My head was in turmoil, but it seemed wise to record my most bizarre thoughts on the chance I could use them in a future book. But as I tried I found myself incapable of concentration. Each image too slippery to pin down—my imprecise words could not capture their true meaning. Frustrated, I rubbed my strained eyes and saw my mother's face behind the explosions that followed. It was stretched out and warped, but conveyed utter disappointment in me. My tired brain struggled to comprehend why, and when I realized I had been crying but didn't know for how long I knew it was time to lie down again. There was so little time before the dawning sunlight would burn away the vestiges of my nightmares and force me to confront a far worse dread.

* * *

I stood by the door for an hour, dressed in my finest pinstriped suit, holding my mother's tiny diary. Behind me, my wife moved from room to room, dressing for the funeral. She was only a few feet away, while I was unmoored and untethered, drifting into the ether and away from the world I knew. Wherever I was going, nothing would be the same for me. And I wanted to cry over what I had lost, and because I was afraid of what was to come.

Wanda and I arrived at the funeral home early to say our goodbyes. My mother lay in her casket, but I only recognized her by fragments—the actual person I knew was gone; a wax stranger lay in her place. Wanda stood to

the side while I whispered my final words, then touched the diary waiting in my jacket pocket. It wasn't much comfort.

I dried my damp eyes and turned to my wife, but found my aunt instead, standing in the middle of the room, her eyes bulging, her lips quivering. I didn't know if she was crying, laughing, or barely containing her fury, and I didn't care. I knew only my own fury.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I've come to prevent you from making a serious mistake."

"What are you talking about?"

"The diary. What did you do with her diary?"

"How is that your business?"

She stalked toward me. She was smaller and frailer, yet descended like a fuming giant.

"I'm trying to help you, don't you see? I'm trying to save your soul."

"My soul doesn't need any saving. My soul is doing quite fine on its own."

She stopped, thankfully, and glared at me. Then she noticed my wife.

"What's it like," she asked her, "being married to an idiot?"

"Hey," I shouted. "You talk to me. Stay the hell away from her."

My aunt laughed.

"You have no idea what that book is, do you?" She shook her head. "I'd hoped you'd burned it and its sin from the world. I'd hoped you'd burned it and scattered the ashes. But I see now. You're no different from him. I knew it as soon as I laid eyes on you. Your mother didn't listen, but I knew, and I protected her. Your father at least had alien malevolence behind his eyes. You? You've always had nothing. Maybe those evil secrets will fill you, but if we are all lucky it will be your funeral soon enough."

With this, she wrapped her black silk scarf around her neck and stormed out of the funeral home. She did not once turn to acknowledge me or my mother, the woman who had once called her sister. It was as if she were a stranger, and that was perhaps the most hateful thing she did on that day. She denied my mother one last goodbye before she left this plane. I'd had enough of my aunt and her zealotry and antics, and swore I would never intentionally set eyes on her again.

If I'd only had the strength.

* * *

The funeral had been more difficult than I'd anticipated, and the various pains offered me a clarity I could have happily done without. When Wanda and I arrived home, all I wanted was to take off my suit, pour myself the strongest drink we had, and sink into the couch. I needed to clear the thoughts that gathered in my head like storm clouds. Even with Wanda near, I was bereft, and in my distraction I realized the jacket I was trying to hang was too heavy. Something was in its pocket, something that was not my wallet, and as I freed it I felt my heart seize.

My mother's diary. In the commotion of my aunt's entrance and accusations, I'd forgotten that it was still in my pocket, that I hadn't put it in her casket, even as we dropped flowers onto her vault. Everything had been wiped from my mind as I was consumed by sadness and anger, but what I had done was unforgivable. My mistake was irreparable.

The guilt broke me. I became a recluse. For weeks, I was unable to function without dwelling on my failure, on what it meant for my mother's journey beyond the veil. Wanda did her best to help me, but I rejected everything she said. I was inconsolable. When eventually she had to return to work, I was left alone to wallow in my private darkness. I knew intellectually she had no choice, but an irrational part of me could not forgive her abandonment. I treated her poorly when she came home at night, which over time caused her to return later and later in the evening.

If only I still had my writing, my one escape from life's torments, but it too evaporated in the shadow of my guilt. As days became weeks, my head filled with chaotic imagery—swirling star-studded vistas and cosmic turbulence—and those few sentences I managed to scribble down were senseless. My mind raced too fast and in too many directions to capture it all, and what was left were fragments strung illogically together, wholly indecipherable as soon as I set them down. Without writing, without my wife, without any anchor at all, I slipped further beneath the surface.

As time passed and I became less frequently sober, the voices that pushed in from the edges of my thoughts worked themselves deeper into my psyche. I could not forget my failure to bury the diary, but neither could I spend the rest of my life staring at it—not if I wanted to resist falling irrecoverably into insanity. The idea crossed my mind to burn it, but I

couldn't. It would have been like burning the last piece of my mother, and perhaps my only link to my father. I spent my time daydreaming what might be contained within the diary's pages, what secrets my mother had wanted to keep hidden. My aunt knew something, and it was so vile she could not contain herself around me. Who was my father? What had he done? I wanted so desperately to know.

It was only a matter of time before I could no longer resist the temptation. Between bouts of drinking I found myself holding the diary, running my hands over its worn covers, convincing myself I could feel heat exuding from it. When I finally broke the seal and cracked it open, when I finally saw my mother's name in her large schoolgirl hand, I nearly retched, as though my body were revolting at the thought of what I was about to do. I could have put it down easily, forgotten about it, left it behind, restarted and repaired my life. But instead I leafed through pages so well thumbed they were linen, looking for mention of my father.

I quickly forgot my purpose and became lost in my mother's life. I had known her only as overly worried and overprotective, but quickly I came to realize she had once been anything but. She had thrived on ill-considered risk in her youth and was often joined by my equally adventurous Aunt Renée, not yet quite as angry or as pious as she would become. The revelations in the diary were so bizarre and unlikely I could barely believe them. Were they not in my mother's handwriting, likely I wouldn't have.

She was introduced to my father at a holiday picnic. By then she was bordering thirty and was still not looking terribly hard for someone, yet he emerged nevertheless from what she called "a sea of Coke bottle glasses." She did not think much of him at the time—he was a quiet, aloof, attractive only in an inoffensive and average way, and was the opposite of every man or boy she'd ever dated. Even his speech was peculiar, as though he'd only read books from a hundred years earlier or more and yet had no idea how to pronounce most of the words. Strangely, instead of repelling her, she found it oddly charming and began seeing him despite my Aunt Renée's jealous disapproval.

The honeymoon period of my parents' affair did not last long. Soon after they started spending time together my mother was subjected to a string of intense nightmares. She didn't elaborate, hinting only rarely about what they entailed. What was more concerning were the headaches and

nosebleeds they caused. Her suffering was genuine, and the only balm was to start recording those terrifying visions. I recognized a lot of the exorcised images in the poems Wanda had found. As the frequency and intensity of my mother's nightmares grew, the sleepless nights and terrible thoughts ate away at her waking life.

Whatever their cause, my aunt took her seriously. She too had noticed peculiarities about the man, things that were not quite right. Like the way he seemed to forget how to use his hands, or stuttered when he spoke as though warming up an unused instrument. He did not recognize simple things such as streetlights, but his memory for what he encountered was eidetic. And yet he was only interested or aware of his surroundings when he stared into the night sky.

My aunt did not understand my mother's infatuation with him, and for the first time we agreed. My father sounded wholly undeserving of my mother's affection, and yet he remained in her life, despite how poor its quality had become. My mother fell ill and remained so for a very long time, the constant morass of nightmares destroying her sleep, preventing her from doing anything but shambling through the new house she and my father had bought together. Then, without incitement, without reason, my mother admitted she'd become suspicious of who my father was. I skipped forward and back, trying to understand what she meant, but she did not mention it again. "He is not who he says," was the entirety of what she wrote, and even that she tried to scribble out.

With the next entry, her journal became consumed with poetry, foregoing the recording and documentation of her life. The poems were as strange and confusing as anything I'd read, made more bizarre by their inchoate nature. They were prototypical pieces without sense of timeframe or inspiration. They simply existed in that no man's land of the past, the churning blood of her unconscious. But even jumbled and fragmented, when I read closer I was struck with a kind of terrified confusion. My mother clearly didn't realize what she was doing as she wrote those poems, but I knew. I knew because they were the same images I saw every time I sat in front of my keyboard. I was dreaming my mother's horrors, sharing her mindscape. And instinctively I knew we were not the only ones. Someone else haunted our mutual dreams. Someone else for whom they were not dreams at all.

* * *

I found nothing more in my mother's diary. As abruptly as her poetry began, it stopped, and in its wake all she entered were the most perfunctory details of her life. My father became a ghost in the pages, never mentioned, though his presence was felt among the accounts of my mother's activities. His illness was fleetingly suggested during an account of my mother being at the hospital, no doubt near the time her pregnancy was discovered. Shortly thereafter an oblique apology was made about my aunt, but what had caused the falling out was unclear. Whatever it was, words were not needed to communicate its seriousness. Yet it didn't stop my aunt from visiting, as a short entry about going to tea soon followed. Even the date of my father's death was unclear. No mention of it was made before I reached the unexpected end of the diary, and on reviewing the preceding entries to see what I'd missed, I found only more questions. With my mother gone and her diary unresolved, there remained only one person who knew my father at all, one person who might answer those questions my mother did not want me to ask. As loath as I was to see my Aunt Renée, I knew I had no other choice.

Sometime in the midst of my breakdown I'd received word from a distant cousin that my aunt was ill. She was confined to a bed in a hospital a few minutes from her house in Maple. After what happened at the funeral, I understood why she never reached out to let me know she was sick—no doubt she expected me to be glad, as though there were some divine justice to it all. She would have been right, but part of me understood that it was a horrible thing to feel. I telephoned Wanda with the news, but regretted it as soon as I heard the distance in her voice. Still, she urged me to go see my aunt.

"Dan, you have to. You'll regret it if you don't. She's family."

"Is she? I don't even know anymore."

"She related enough. You need to put everything behind you and go. Maybe it's the fresh start you need."

I knew she was right. I needed to see my Aunt Renée because she was not long for the world, and when she went the truth about my heritage, about the strange revelations in my mother's diary, would go with her. But I was also terrified about what she might say. I wasn't certain I could bear to

hear it. But what choice was there? Wanda was right: I would never be able to move on until I spoke to her, and time was running out. I sobered up enough to drive to the hospital and park on the fifth floor of the garage. Then I stayed in the car for thirty minutes, preparing myself.

The hospital had been built within the last decade, and unlike where my mother had suffered through her final days, it was clean and full of sunlight. My aunt's room was private, and flowers filled the windowsill—as did crucifixes of various sizes, and a single image of Jesus in a golden frame. My aunt was asleep, snoring gently, her glasses askew on her head. On the tray table beside her sat a covered lunch, waiting for her to wake and eat. I pushed it aside then gently called her name.

“Aunt Renée. It's me. It's Daniel.”

One eye creaked open, then the other. There was the wheeze of oxygen pumped into her nose. She carefully licked her lips.

“What are you doing here? You stink.”

Her voice was little more than a slurred croak. I tried not to be reminded of my mother.

“I need to talk to you. I need you to tell me about my father.”

She closed her eyes and laughed—one hitch of her shoulders, her breath rattling. Immediately, she winced, but the smile didn't completely fade.

“You can't be saved. Get out. Go away.”

“Aunt Renée, I read my mother's diary. I read all of it.”

To this, her rheumy eyes opened wider.

“What did you learn? Nothing. You didn't learn a thing.”

“I need you to tell me who he was. What happened to him? Why were my mother's dreams so strange?”

I was desperate for answers, growing more desperate when I heard how difficult it was for her to breathe. I did not know how much longer she had.

“Give me some water. That nurse, she's trying to kill me. What's the opposite of drowning? She's trying to dry me out. She wants my jewelry.”

I was confused for a moment—my aunt was wearing no jewelry—but when I saw her crippled hands adjusting a clasp that wasn't there, I realized her medication was causing her to hallucinate.

“Do you know where you are right now?” I asked. She gave me a sidelong glance as though that didn't deserve an answer. “Do you know who I am, Aunt Renée?”

She shook her head. She didn't want to say.

"Aunt Renée, who am I?"

"I don't know."

"Who am I, Aunt Renée? Tell me who I am."

Suddenly her hatred exploded, filling her with vigor. Her eyes bore into me.

"You're a blasphemy. You're a thing. You're like *him*. Like your father."

"I'm—what?"

"Your mother told me what he was, what he said he was, so we took care of it. But I never believed. I knew he was lying. Satan's kind always lies. He was a foul-blooded thing sent to test and torment us."

"What did she say?" I pleaded. "What did my mother say?"

"It wasn't in your precious diary?" she spat. I shook my head, and she laughed, then slumped, and I watched the energy dissipate from her like spewing air. She closed her eyes to rest.

"What did she say, Aunt Renée? Please tell me."

My aunt spoke, but it was a mumbled whisper. Her last reserves were depleted. One of the machines she was hooked up to buzzed every few seconds. The sound was deafening.

"What did she say?" I repeated, leaning close, my ear to her mouth. Outside in the hall there was some commotion.

"She said he was lost. She said he didn't belong then, that he wanted to go back. She said he hated the meat most of all, that it wasn't big enough to contain him. She said in his sleep he would make sounds like he was talking, but the words were so old they made her cry. She said he was not who he said he was, and when she found out he wouldn't let her go. He was a monster."

"What did he do?"

"Do?" she asked, her eyelids cracking apart, revealing a sliver of white. "He made you. Wasn't that enough?"

My aunt fell asleep then, and try as I might I could not revive her. When I left, the nurses were making her as comfortable as they could.

* * *

I'm left with more questions than answers.

My Aunt Renée never regained consciousness, and it wasn't long before she was buried, too, in Mount Pleasant Cemetery, not far from my mother. I never found out what she was talking about, and little of what I did know made any sense. I tried going through my mother's diary again more than once, traveling back in time to look for hints about what my father was, about what my aunt discovered that was so vile she turned into a religious zealot, about what my mother had done that caused her to hide from the world. But there was nothing, no stone left to turn. All I had were impressions and my mother's frightening poetry. And my unbearable dreams.

I find it impossible to write now. Every image that appears to me is suspect—I wonder if they are of my own conjuring or strange visions from my father, trying to communicate with me from wherever he is. I'm sure he is somewhere, alive, as out of my reach as I am of his. He still communicates to me through my dreams, and they continue to degrade and become unbearable, as though my inability to lance them by way of writing is only building up the pressure. If that's true, I wonder how long it will be until I explode, and what might happen then. But I can't—I just can't bring myself to write another word, so instead I drink and sit in the dark and wait for whatever truth is coming to reveal itself at last. Wanda has not given up on me yet, but it's only a matter of time. I have nothing left inside that she would want—it has been carved away by death and unearthed secrets. What remains is a shell, a living, breathing shell of meat and blood, existing in the present. The sort of thing an ancient alien being might want to inhabit, should it somehow be skipping through time and space in search of a vessel. That's the sort of crazy idea that occurs to me now, the sort I can no longer exorcise through writing. It is like something that might occur to one trapped deep in the horror of a nightmare. Trapped without any hope for escape.

Revival

STEPHEN WOODWORTH

A graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, Stephen Woodworth is the author of the New York Times best-selling Violet series of paranormal thrillers, including Through Violet Eyes, With Red Hands, In Golden Blood, and From Black Rooms (Random House, 2004–06). His short fiction has appeared in such publications as Weird Tales, Realms of Fantasy, Fantasy & Science Fiction, The Year's Best Fantasy, and The Dead That Walk, and he has other tales forthcoming in Nameless and Midian Unmade, an anthology of stories inspired by the works of Clive Barker. He is currently at work on a new novel.

BRICE HUGGED THE LAPELS OF HIS FILTHY DOWN jacket closer around himself as he squinted down the brick chasm of the alley. Darkened doorways sulked in the walls on either side, offering neither entrance nor exit. The only sign of movement was an empty plastic bag, tumbling hollowly in the gusting draft like a shed skin.

Everything about the place felt wrong. The location was too deserted, too deep into the shunned heart of the city. Most missions stationed their soup kitchens and makeshift chapels on the fringes of the urban blight—close enough to draw the shambling needy, yet removed enough for their staff members to leave safely at night. If Brice had not been so cold and so hungry, even he, a native of the streets, could not have been lured into this district.

He consulted the crumpled flyer in his hand to check the address, but could not read the small typescript. No streetlamps illuminated the surrounding grime of metal-shuttered shops and sewage-scented asphalt. All he could make out was the large heading that first captured his attention:

REVIVAL TONIGHT.

He'd come by the advertisement not more than an hour ago as he trudged up Main Street toward the nearest shelter that would take him in. A four-mile walk, and he wouldn't get there till well after midnight. He had no money, no food, no liquor, and the few passersby at that hour bowed their heads and quickened their steps if he so much as looked at them. In summer, he could have curled up on a vacant doorstep and slept till the cops came to shoo him away, but tonight's bitter winter wind cut right through his stocking cap and frayed jeans, and sleep would be impossible.

Without alcohol to squelch them, unwelcome memories bobbed into his consciousness like the flotsam of a wrecked ship. A job, a wife, a son whom he was no longer permitted to see. Lashed by regret for a life squandered and exhausted by the prospect of the dreary hours ahead, Brice had slumped against an adjacent lamppost, ready to collapse and die of exposure rather than take another step.

As if in commiseration, a hand grasped his upper arm and squeezed, constricting to the point of painfulness.

Brice straightened to look at the slouching figure that had accosted him. “Leon?”

The man before him wore a gray flannel sweatshirt, the face cowed completely by a pullover hood. Yet in the static world of the homeless, clothing served as much a marker of identity as a face for street people to recognize one another. That hoodie certainly looked like the one Leon always wore, though mottled by new and darker stains. He stank in a way peculiar for a vagrant—a salty putrescence, like the rot of beached kelp. The smell repulsed Brice more than the fetor of sweat and urine he’d expected, and he recoiled, wrinkling his nose.

Whether or not he was Leon, the man didn’t say. He simply peeled a sheet from a sheaf of papers he carried and thrust it at Brice. The latter winced with disgust as he accepted the page—its margins were sticky where the hooded man had touched it.

In the dun glow of the sodium vapor streetlight, Brice saw that most of the sheet was covered with a radiating, serpentine pattern of intertwined lines, as if a map to a labyrinth with no egress. In the ring’s center, calligraphic letters promised “REVIVAL TONIGHT,” with details of the event in smaller print below. Brice noted that both time and location were near.

“They got food?” Brice asked the man he assumed was Leon, but the hooded figure shuffled away without speaking. Brice rubbed his bicep, which was still sore from where the man had clenched it, and cursed when he found finger-shaped smudges where a gummy residue had clung to the sleeve of his jacket.

Leon was not the sort to have got religion. Most likely, Brice thought, someone had paid him a few bucks to distribute the flyers. Brice himself had little hope of salvation, but he’d often turned to the missionaries for a hot meal and a roof over his head. On this night, he’d settle for a cup of coffee and a chance to doze during the sermon.

* * *

And so he'd wended through the litter-strewn avenues of this abandoned quarter of the metropolis, advancing in the shadows to avoid being rolled by thrill-seeking gang members. Now that he was here, though, it seemed as if he'd fallen victim to some cruel practical joke. He could find no brightly lit prayer meeting, no hallelujahs and hosannas, no comfort or consolation.

As he scrutinized the flyer, a glimpse of motion in the alley caught his attention. A dim phantom drifted about halfway down the narrow lane—a shuffling figure whose gray, hooded sweatshirt appeared to float amidst the engulfing blackness. It turned through an open portal on the right and vanished from view.

Brice followed the way Leon—if it was indeed Leon—had gone. He found that the double doors there, though shut, were unlocked. They opened onto a steep stairwell that sloped into what must have been the building's basement.

Brice hesitated, for there seemed to be no light below, and he wondered if he had selected the correct entrance. As he crossed the threshold, however, he realized that a faint, bluish luminescence clearly delineated the downward steps, though its source was uncertain.

He descended to a low-ceilinged hallway and was heartened to hear music of a sort emanating from the opposite end of the passage—a solemn, sonorous hymn distorted by the odd acoustics of the structure's cinderblock foundation. The azure phosphorescence grew brighter as he advanced, until it hung like a haze in the air, although it still had no definite origin. This must be the right place after all, Brice decided.

The hallway led to a room that was much larger and higher than he anticipated. Now there could be no question but that Brice had found the correct gathering, for the flyer's spiraling design of interlaced lines had been reproduced on the vast far wall, radiating blue light as if it were an enormous stained-glass window illumined from behind by a great nocturnal sun. Cerulean hues shimmered on a sea of Brice's fellow derelicts, making them appear submerged. The entire congregation stood swaying in time to the dirge-tempo psalm he'd heard.

Brice grimaced at the lack of benches or folding chairs. No chance to nap here. To avoid attracting attention, he mingled with the crowd at the rear. Slightly out of sync with those around him, he mouthed along with the chorus, whose words he couldn't quite make out, and made random

vocalizations in an attempt to mimic the increasingly atonal canticle. Not like any gospel song Brice had heard before. Maybe this was one of those New Age religious orders. He only hoped they would reward him for enduring their ceremony.

Brice exchanged an embarrassed glance with the man on his left, who also faked the song. Bald crown, walrus mustache, sagging cheeks blotched with rosacea—it was Richie, a friend of his from the streets. They pretended not to recognize each other, however, as if both were ashamed they would stoop to such an indignity just for a handout.

Brice had to admit that the church, whatever denomination it was, put on a good show. As the hymn became more fervent, the pattern on the wall brightened from blue to white, the shifting, swirling intensity of color giving the design an illusion of three-dimensional depth.

When the brightness grew almost unbearable, the silhouette of a cowed figure strode in front of the glowing pattern until it stood beneath the circle's center. Brice wondered briefly if it was Leon ... but no, this figure wore a robe, not a hoodie. It towered over the standing congregation, yet there seemed to be no dais to elevate it. And when it raised its arms in exaltation, the robe's sleeves slid down to reveal hands with fingers that were too long, too splayed.

Brice had no time for fear, only a stupefied astonishment. For the sinuous lacework pattern on the wall suddenly *uncurled*, the undulating lines exploding forth as gelatinous tendrils. The tip of each elastic appendage shot out and slapped down on the head of an unsuspecting congregant. A suckling mask of translucent protoplasm enveloped Richie's silently shrieking face, the membrane distending and stretching the obscured visage into a grotesque new configuration.

Only when Brice felt the soggy smack of ooze on his own head did he comprehend the miracle of which he was now a part.

The burning slime embraced his entire body, melting and molding his flesh like modeling wax. Brice shrieked with the ecstasy of religious conversion, yawned open his mouth to receive the viscous communion that poured down his throat to transubstantiate him from within. He realized that he had been touched by a real, living, tangible god. A god who would remake him in His image.

For the first time in years, Brice was no longer tempted to succumb to despair and die. Not with the purpose that now coursed through him, the mission that he must perform.

* * *

Hours later, yet still well before dawn, he shuffled into the foyer of the homeless shelter. Understaffed and overcrowded, the facility consisted of little more than one large dormitory room lined with cots, all of which were already taken. The sole attendant on duty sat at a desk by the entrance, reading by the light of a low-slung shaded desk lamp so as not to wake the occupants.

“Mr. Brice?” She greeted him, as she always did, with a desperate cheerfulness. Her name was Maureen, a volunteer social worker fresh out of college who hadn’t been there long enough to become jaded or embittered by the intractable urban malaise. “We haven’t seen you lately. Are you ... okay?”

She obviously hadn’t looked up until he’d passed her. Brice did not turn around. Paper rustled as he thumbed a sheet off the stack in his arm and passed it back to her. The page adhered to his fingers until she peeled it off with an exclamation of distaste.

Then he ambled on into the dormitory, where benighted sleepers awaited his evangelism.

The Wall of Asshur-sin

DONALD TYSON

Donald Tyson is the author of Alhazred (Llewellyn, 2006), a novel about the mad poet who wrote the Necronomicon, and also the collection of occult mystery stories The Ravener and Others (Avalonia, 2011), which concerns the investigations of strange and uncanny occurrences by the Elizabethan sage Dr. John Dee and his friend, the alchemist Edward Kelley. The Dream World of H. P. Lovecraft (Llewellyn, 2011) is a biography of Lovecraft. Tyson has also written numerous nonfiction books on the history and practice of Western occultism.

1.

A FITFUL GUST OF WIND CAST A WRAITH OF SAND through the open window of the Land Rover. Fine grains salted the sweating neck of Eric Ténisan. By turns the wind obscured and revealed the horizon, playing with his expectation like a mischievous child. The Bedouins called this remote part of Yemen the Land of Lost Souls. It was a fanciful way to describe so bleak and empty a waste, yet strangely evocative.

He glanced at the profile of his beautiful young wife, Sheila. No matter how hot the sun, she never perspired. Her gaze was fixed on a tiny red spider that clung for life at the lower corner of the windscreen. The spider had been with them since they turned off the paved highway. She had said little for the past hundred miles. With an habitual gesture, he fingered the irregular edge of the gold medallion that hung around his neck on a chain through the hole at its center. The medallion had been with him for so many years, he was barely aware of doing it.

“Most of the dust is being stirred up from the road. We’ll leave it behind soon.”

The spider flew away. Released from her meditation, she smiled acknowledgment and turned to watch the Cyclopean stones flash past her window. The desert was piled with massive rounded boulders that projected up through the sands like the bald skulls of buried giants. Long black hair at the side of her face veiled her features. As he so often had over the brief months of their courtship, he wondered what might be on her mind.

The steering wheel lurched and he caught it in time to guide the car across the surface of a huge rock. It was white and gently domed, like the shell of some vast lunar egg. He remembered it as though he had seen it yesterday, even though it had been over fifty years—but who is so empty of romance that he ever forgets the road that leads to Asshur-sin?

The last time he crossed this dome of rock, he had been a wide-eyed seventeen-year-old mounted awkwardly on the back of a camel, doing his best to pretend he knew how to ride so that his father’s Arab diggers would

not laugh at him behind their hands. The road had not existed. It was his first experience as the paid member of a field expedition, and he could barely contain his excitement. Through the shimmering heat of memory he saw the sweat-stained white shirt and gray hair of his father, the great Norwegian archaeologist Olaf Ténison, who rode his white Arabian horse with familiar ease across the treacherous dome of stone.

The sand from the open roadway hissed annoyance at the escaping vehicle, and then they were lost among the flowing boulders and sensuous rills where the wind wept in dizzy eddies. He leaned forward to gaze up through the tinted edge of the windscreen at the sun. It was just past noon.

2.

“DARLING, ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY SURE YOU WANT TO walk the Wall?” he had asked her a week ago in the darkness of their Cairo hotel room.

They had just finished making love and lay in the bed side by side with a single crisp cotton sheet drawn up to their hips, surrounded by a gauzy veil of mosquito netting. The ancient air conditioner beneath the window was unequal to the task of countering the night heat. Rather than listen to it banging away in futility, he had turned it off and opened the window wide to the breeze from the Nile.

When she said nothing, he spoke again.

“The climb alone is almost a kilometer, and it’s more than three across the top in the hot sun, to say nothing of the descent down the ramps and the hike back to the truck.”

“Of course I want to climb the Wall, Eric. I’m looking forward to it.”

Her tone was subdued, almost indifferent, a curious contrast to the enthusiasm with which she had begged him to make this irrational trek back into his past as part of their honeymoon adventure. He should be accustomed to her moods, he told himself. She changed like the sea. It was her unpredictable nature that had first attracted him—that, and her strikingly original beauty.

“Who was that man who spoke to you at dinner?”

“I didn’t speak to anyone.”

“That dark man with the odd symbol tattooed on the back of his hand.”

“I don’t remember. Let me sleep, darling, I’m completely exhausted.”

The tip of her cigarette glowed once, then she ground it out in the ashtray on her bedside table and turned her back to him in darkness. He lay on his left shoulder and vainly sought to distinguish her outline while he listened to the slow beat of his own heart.

What business had a man in his late sixties to take a young bride less than half his age? Months ago, when he first saw Sheila staring up at him with rapt attention during one of his public lectures at Cambridge, his

routine had been comfortable and predictable. He had long since reconciled himself to a solitary and sexless life. An elderly housekeeper fed his tropical fish and took in his mail while he was away from his residence at the university on lecture tours. What more did an aging professor of archaeology need?

If asked at that time, he could have confidently stated where he would be and what he would be doing on any day in the coming year. Yet here he was, only a few months later, lying in a hotel room in Egypt with this strange and beautiful woman at his side.

Even today, he had no idea what it was about his manner or interests that had attracted her. True, he was a respected authority in his field, though not nearly so renowned as his father. No one could hope to fill Olaf Tensan's boots. But his father was dead, and that made him arguably the world's leading authority on Asshur-sin and its artifacts. Yet these were scarcely qualities to attract the love or stir the desires of a worldly woman such as Sheila Marsh. She had her own more than adequate source of income, so it was not his money she was after. He had eventually convinced himself that she must truly love him, and he had begun to love her in return.

3.

THE MAMMOTH ROCKS OF THE LAND OF LOST SOULS formed a natural road that declined at a slight but noticeable angle. He downshifted, and the Rover's engine whined as it slowed the vehicle on a steeper than normal slope. For a dozen kilometers the way twisted like a dying snake, the weaving stone buttresses that rose abruptly on either side concealing the path to come and the path behind. He attempted no more conversation, but forced himself to be aware of the landscape around him—of the bit of green high in a stony fissure on his left; of the gray lizard atop a boulder that ate the withered corpse of one of its cousins with quick motions of its almost human-like hands. In the midst of life there is death, but here there was far more death than life.

In spite of his resolve, his mind slipped into memory.

"Are you happy?" he had asked her on the train platform the day of their arrival in Yemen.

She had brushed strands of wind-blown hair away from her large, ice-blue eyes and gazed up at him with the serious yet enigmatic expression that had become so familiar.

"Deliriously so. From the window of the train I watched a little girl with a great clay water pot balanced on her head. At each step it swayed back and forth, threatening to fall, and the girl kept raising her hand as if to steady it, but never once did her fingers actually touch the pot. She was walking east, so I knew it was a good omen."

It was the kind of thing she said from time to time. He had come to expect such cryptic remarks and no longer tired his brain trying to decipher their meaning.

She turned from him to handle their baggage. With mingled feelings of love and possessiveness in his heart, he watched her stride across the train platform to argue with the almost somnambulant porter. Once again he found himself marveling at her indifference to the heat. Her conservative gray travel suit retained its crease from the morning. He had never seen her

perspire, even though her pallid skin, so white that it was almost blue beneath the blazing Arabian sun, always looked slightly moist. This was just an illusion, but at times it disturbed him. Her complexion reminded him of the ivory underbelly of a frog, and the impression was not lessened by her large and oddly prominent eyes.

She had confided early in their relationship that her entire family was cold-blooded by nature.

“I’m descended from a long line of Yankee traders who made their living upon the southern oceans of the world. There is more salt water than blood in my veins.”

Once, in a teasing way, he had called her his undine lover. She had stared into his eyes for so many moments he was certain he must have offended her, but then she smiled and kissed his cheek.

“My Nordic troll, so big and clumsy and awkward,” she had murmured seductively into his ear.

4.

HIS PULSE QUICKENED WITH EXPECTATION. THE stony ground became more level and the shrouding cliffs on either side of the road parted like a theater curtain. Alive to Sheila's reaction to her first glimpse of the Wall, he drove onto the crest of the lookout and turned off the Rover's engine.

The Wall towered on the far side of the valley, its sheer size making it seem nearer than it was. This was the first time he had viewed it stripped clean of its ancient veil of rubble, and it was even more impressive than he remembered. Surely she must feel a similar emotion, gazing at the greatest wonder of the world, from the vantage where he had first seen it, seated on the back of a camel in his awkward youth. But she remained silent.

He cast his wide gray eyes across five decades of time, and still further back, across untold millennia to the very childhood of man. The same potent blend of humility and wonder he had felt as a teenager returned into his heart. He had not felt it for many years.

The Wall of Asshur-sin, wall of walls that rendered China's defense less than a hedgerow. Fifty years ago it was deemed a miracle. A local Bedouin detected something unnaturally precise in a range of coastal mountains and informed his mullah. After monumental excavations supervised by the elder Tenisan, the wall at last had revealed itself to the admiring eyes of the worshipful. Poets, mystics, and scientists made pilgrimages from the far corners of the world to stand at its base and marvel. But that was half a century ago, and the world, ever preoccupied with the concerns and novelties of the present moment, had turned its gaze elsewhere.

It spanned the gap between the western mountains of the valley like a stone Samson, twisting perspective with its impossible bulk. Eric stretched his mind, yet still could not contain its edges—nearly a kilometer tall and three kilometers across, what meaning had such dimensions? For untold ages the Wall had stood, defending the lost civilization of this desert valley against that most jealous mistress of the world, the sea.

“Magnificent,” he said from the depths of his heart. “I wanted you to see it first as I saw it. We’ll continue down now.” He re-started the engine and released the parking brake.

5.

HE WONDERED IF SHE WAS THINKING OF JOHNNY Azotha, the man with the dark eyes and shining black hair they had met in Egypt. Surely it was no more than his morbid fancy that the man had followed them from Cairo? A coincidence that he should arrive in Yemen at the same time, nothing more. While dining at the English Club in Sana'a, it had been natural that she should seek out his table, since his was the sole familiar face.

"Your wife tells me you go to see Asshur-sin," the dark man greeted him when he returned to the table with her package of cigarettes. He spoke English well, with a trace of the British accent he had acquired as a student at Oxford.

Eric frowned, thinking they sat too close.

"Most tourists are not keen enough to endure the journey now that the Wall has lost its newness," the man continued. "But I suppose it has a special significance for you, Doctor Tensan. You were one of the first, weren't you?"

"I was part of the initial exploratory dig. My father headed the expedition."

"Ah, yes, the great Olaf Tensan. You must be so proud to be his son."

She had been unusually expansive that night, doing her best to draw him out of himself in spite of his bad mood.

"I had to plead with him to bring me, Johnny, he was like a mule." She mimicked his Norwegian accent. "You won't like it, Sheila. All that horrible dust."

They both laughed. Eric found himself toying with the medallion at his throat. He inched the chain that suspended it around his neck through its central hole. It was an habitual response to frustration. The Arab pointed at it.

"That is a curious trinket. Where did you buy it?"

Eric resisted the irrational urge to hide the spiral design behind his hand. The medallion was shaped like a wheel with curved spokes and an open

hub.

“I found it, actually, when I was seventeen. At the Wall.”

It was a subject he did not like to talk about. Sheila would not relent, and for her sake he told the dark man the story.

“The second night of the dig I was restless with excitement. I couldn’t sleep. There was a full moon that night, bright as day, so I got up and walked from where the tents were pitched in the plaza of the ancient city ruins. I climbed—that is, I must have climbed the ramps to the top. The diggers found me there the next morning at the middle of the causeway. I was clutching this medallion in my fist.”

Unconsciously he closed his fingers around it until his knuckles grew white.

“He was completely traumatized,” Sheila finished for him. “Couldn’t even speak for three weeks. No one could pry that medallion from his hand. They say he screamed like a banshee whenever anyone tried to take it away, so finally his father strung a chain through that hole in its center and hung it around his neck just to get him to go to sleep. He has no memory of picking it up. He was flown to a hospital in Cairo and has never once returned to the Wall.”

While his wife talked, Eric found himself staring at the tattoo on the back of the dark man’s left hand. It stirred something buried deep under the layers of his psyche. The blue design depicted a creature that vaguely resembled an octopus. A shudder of revulsion swept through his body. He forced his gaze away.

“I have been there, you know, several times.” The dark man shrugged. “I don’t think so much of it. Only stones piled on stones, after all.”

“And the ocean behind—does that impress you?” Eric asked coolly.

“Ah, the ocean. I have a theory. When this Asshur-sin, whoever he was, built his wall, there was no ocean. And then later the waters rose up until”—he spread his tanned hands—“there you are.”

He remembered disputing this falsehood under the other’s mocking stare. Sheila had smiled the shadow of a smile, catching the flavor of the dark man’s irreverence.

6.

THE DRIVE ACROSS THE VALLEY FLOOR TOOK ON A nightmare quality for Eric. Always it seemed the Wall could get no larger, yet always it grew upward until at last its black face blocked half the sky. The effect was strange, a pressing on the chest and a shortness of breath, as if the Wall itself were squeezing out the stuff of life. He climbed dizzily from the Land Rover onto the packed brown sand, holding its roof for balance, his eyes irresistibly drawn to the summit.

The Wall was not perfectly vertical, though it appeared so when standing near its base. The blocks that formed it were made of black rock not indigenous to this part of Yemen, but the quarry for the Wall had never been located. The general presumption was that the stones had been brought from some distant land across the sea by barge. Each regular block was forty meters long and twelve meters high, but the foundation blocks at the base were even larger. Eric had never seen most of these stones with his own eyes. Half a century ago they had been obscured by a titanic slope of sand and rubble that ascended nearly to the top of the Wall. Yet nothing in his life was more familiar. He had studied thousands of photographs and films of the stones over the course of his archaeological researches.

Stepless ramps ascended either side of the Wall in diminishing zigzag diagonals to the top. In keeping with its monstrous proportions, each ramp was four meters wide, as though designed for a race of giants. When uncovered from beneath the debris fifty years ago, a debate had raged as to their purpose. They were unsuited for dragging large objects to the top due to the tight bends where the ramps met, and were in any case too narrow to accommodate the stones of the Wall itself, yet their architecture was wastefully extravagant, when narrow and steeper flights of steps would have served to provide ascent.

The waves a thousand meters above me, he thought, his mind numb. And through the stones where I stand, black ooze and things that have never seen the sun. This nameless hidden valley was the lowest land elevation in

the world—more than twice as far beneath sea level as the previous record holder, the Dead Sea. If the Wall were ever to collapse ...

He shuddered and took his wife's arm, guiding her to the very foot of the edifice where the inscription had been unearthed from beneath uncounted of tons of till. Cut into the side of one of the massive foundation blocks was an unpretentious recess not more than two meters deep. It appeared to be a later addition to the architecture, added long after the building of the Wall itself, although its date remained unresolved. An open sarcophagus of the same native white stone they had driven across on their approach to the valley rested within the recess. Neither the lid of the sarcophagus nor any trace of its contents had ever been found. It lay upon an oblong dais of black Wall-stone, part of the great foundation block itself, that raised it to within arm's length of the ceiling of the recess. Steps were cut into the sides of this dais as though to allow access to the open stone vessel, or from it.

Eric entered the recess and led his wife behind the elevated sarcophagus. The glare of the desert sun, reflected from the distant white mountains, shone into the cavity and highlighted the shadows of cuneiform characters that were deeply carved into the ceiling above the sarcophagus. Although he had studied reproductions of these letters on countless occasions, this was the first time he had seen them with his naked eyes. He felt a sense of awe tighten his throat.

"What does it say?" his wife asked in a casual tone, yet he detected suppressed interest in her words. Her large ice-blue eyes shone as she stared upward at the letters with an expression almost of reverence.

"It's written in an ancient Sumerian proto-dialect," he said, unconsciously adopting his professorial lecturing voice. "This is the only example that has ever been found, so all translations are conjectural. But I believe it to be some kind of warning."

"A warning? How exciting!"

She took his hand into hers, and he felt the coolness of her palm. Her slender fingers were never warm. He pointed to each character in turn as he read the primary inscription aloud.

"*Asshur-sin, king—or perhaps high-priest, or herald, it's not clear which—keeps this Wall for—or perhaps against—the awakening of the Deep One. Beware his Emissaries.*"

He pointed at one of the characters that had been damaged and was largely obscured.

“I take that to stand for the Wall itself, from the context of the text, although it is obviously illegible.”

“It has been chiseled away,” she said.

The confident tone in her voice caused Eric to glance at her. She stared at the damaged symbol almost with resentment.

“Possibly. Or it may have been chipped when the sarcophagus was placed on its dais.”

“Come on.” She pulled him by the hand back into the open. “Let’s climb it.”

He followed with his eyes the set of ramps that ran up the left side.

“It’s too far.”

The words caught in his throat. Suddenly he was a boy, running through the moonlit darkness from something that trilled and rustled over the sand behind his pounding heels. How many times had he awakened in his bed, drenched in sweat, with the memory of the same nightmare? He could almost see his pursuers in the corner of his vision when he turned his mind toward them, but at the last instant they always faded back into the darkness and left him shivering.

“I’m sure it looks worse than it really is,” she said lightly, pulling on his hand.

“You go—I’ll stay in the Rover.”

“Eric, I need you to come with me.”

He looked into her face, saw the determination there. The terror that had visited him five decades ago while he lay on top of the wall in the moonlight with his eyes squeezed tightly shut, hugging his knees to his chest, returned. With more violence than he intended, he tore his hand away. She stalked across the sand toward the lowermost ramp without a backward glance, leaving him to follow or not.

7.

AS THEY CLIMBED, THE FLOOR OF THE VALLEY WIDENED beneath them. He caught up with her and kept her to the inside of the inclines, supporting her alternately with his left and then his right arm as the direction of the ramps reversed at each landing. They stopped often to rest, when the ache in their legs became too demanding to ignore. The shadows of afternoon lengthened across the valley. Many years ago he had climbed the Great Pyramid. This was harder.

Imperceptibly, the nature of the valley altered as they mounted ever higher. Details merged and larger shapes defined themselves. What appeared from the ground to be chaotic piles of stones revealed themselves as the decayed foundations of the nameless city, tucked into the eastern end of the valley between looming mountains. Excavations had revealed roads wider than normal, and a curious lack of steps. Eric had done his doctoral thesis on the city. Gazing down upon it like some god on Olympus, he knew every structure, every alleyway. But of the inhabitants, no trace had ever been unearthed, not even their place of burial. The prevailing theory was that they had burned their dead, though where they had found fuel for these funeral pyres in the barren desert remained unclear.

“We’re almost there,” he puffed, badly out of breath. “Two more ramps to the top.”

“I can smell the ocean.”

The resonance in her deep voice startled him. He stole a glance at her face—it was radiant. Her prominent eyes shone with that curious icy-blue glow that made her so different from other women. Though his linen shirt was drenched with sweat, her pale cheeks were cool and she seemed unwearied.

He heard the muted rumble of the sea as it rhythmically broke itself against the immovable stones. It had done so without pause for uncounted thousands of years. Each rolling wave made the ramp tremble beneath his feet, as if from distant thunder.

“Now you must see,” he said somewhat incoherently as they mounted the last incline and the sea breeze touched their faces. “It’s the oddest feeling, standing with a vast empty space on one side and the horizonless ocean on the other. As if the world were flat and you stood balanced on its edge.”

He had no conscious memory of the view, yet somewhere deep within him he saw it lit with moonlight. They walked like insects across the twelve-meter-wide span known as the causeway to the edge of the ocean and gazed down on moving blue water that was so close, its broken spray caught in their hair and salted their lips. The rumble, as each successive wave struck the flat stones, made speech difficult.

Sheila approached the seaward side and stood with the toes of her hiking boots extended off its edge. She spread her arms wide and stared at the western horizon in exultation.

“*Kthulhu p’tang ma’zathu agulu’ka*,” she intoned in voice that rose above the thunder of the breakers.

Eric drew her gently back from the edge.

“What was that you recited?”

She shook her head, still staring out to sea.

“A line from a song my mother used to sing to me. Just nonsense words.”

They turned north and began to walk the Wall. It curved toward the ocean like the bow of the early moon, defying the pressure of the waves. He experienced a few moments of vertigo. The floor of the valley was so far away. Suddenly he seemed to be striding along the razor’s edge of the infinite, with the great ocean on one side poised to overwhelm the world on the other. Nothing held back the cataclysm save this tissue-thin structure of black stone.

“Show me where you found your medallion,” she suddenly demanded as they approached the midpoint of the wall.

Eric looked in front and behind him, trying to reawaken the long-buried memory of that night. Nothing appeared familiar. He did not even remember finding the golden disk, only running with it clutched in his hand through the moonlight, with those sliding menacing things following close behind. But that might be no more than a bad dream.

“I don’t remember—”

She took his arms in her hands and turned him roughly toward her, then stared into his face with solemn intensity.

“It’s important, Eric. Think. Where did you find the medallion?”

He realized he was sweating profusely, so much so that drops of perspiration ran down his face and fell from his nose and chin. An image flashed in his mind of something disgusting and horrible. It had a cluster of writhing tentacles at its top. Then it was gone, taking even the memory of the image with it. He grasped at the medallion and held it tight in his fist.

8.

A SHOUT MADE THEM TURN TO THE NORTH END OF the Wall. A man in a red shirt and white canvas pants approached along the causeway with rapid steps. He waved, and even at that distance Eric recognized the toothy smile of Johnny Azotha. His confusion turned to annoyance. His wife grabbed his hand and pulled him along. Fifteen minutes later the three met breathlessly.

“Johnny, what are you doing here?” Sheila demanded with delight.

“I felt like some exercise, and I knew you two were coming today, so I decided to join you.”

Was it his imagination, or did a glance pass between his wife and the dark man? Eric felt the irrational urge to hurl Azotha over the nearest edge. Instead he forced a polite smile.

The Arab took out a white silk handkerchief and mopped his face.

“Quite a climb. At least there’s a breeze from the ocean.”

The three turned and stared out to sea at the unbroken horizon through intermittent curtains of white foam cast up by the rhythmic breaking of the waves.

“I was trying to persuade Eric to tell me where he found the medallion around his neck.”

“Where did you find it, Doctor Tenisan?” Azotha asked. “I would be interested to hear the story.”

Eric shook his head and turned away from the sea to gaze at the distant mountains across the valley.

“Did you find it on the top? Was it near the center?”

“I don’t remember.”

Sheila hugged his arm possessively between hers.

“You must remember something, darling.”

“No.”

“Perhaps if we retraced your steps,” Azotha mused. “Where were you before you climbed the Wall?”

“Enough!” Eric jerked his arm free from his wife’s grasp and glared at the dark man.

Azotha smiled apologetically and spread his hands, then tucked his handkerchief into his vest pocket. Sheila folded her arms and walked toward the sea-edge of the Wall, her back stiff. There was an awkward silence.

Eric turned back to the mountains. His heart raced and the blood thundered in his ears, but not from anger. Suddenly he did remember. As clearly as though reflected in a mirror, he saw himself amid the ruins of the nameless city that sprawled across the eastern elevation of the valley. He stood in its oddly shaped plaza, gazing down the valley at the moonlit Wall. Before him, at the center of the plaza, rose an octagonal block of black Wall-stone two meters across and a meter in height. As he examined it with the eye of memory, he realized that it had served as some sort of pedestal for a statue—the center of the block was worn by the removal and replacement of some heavy stone object over a span of many centuries. It was curious that in the five decades he had studied Asshur-sin and the nameless city he had never before considered the true function of this stone block.

The moonlight shone strangely on the black stone. It cast into stark relief a circular ring of eight protrusions on its surface. Eric had examined images of the stone a number of times over the years and was sure these bumps were not visible in the photographs. Yet under the light of the full moon they were undeniable. He watched his younger self walk around the block counterclockwise as though moving in a trance, pressing each knob of stone as he passed it. As the final knob descended into the body of the stone, it rumbled softly. A square panel grew out from its eastern side. Eric recognized it as a drawer. He watched himself reach into it and take out the gold medallion, then place the medallion in the center of the octagonal pedestal and orient it in some way to the moon.

A feeling of awful dread clutched his heart. He closed his eyes and wiped his hand down his face. His sweat felt cold on his palm.

“It really is too bad you won’t tell me where you found the talisman, Doctor Tenisan,” Azotha was saying behind him. “It would have been so much easier.”

Eric turned and saw the dark man with his arm around Sheila's throat. A black automatic pistol rested loosely in his other hand, pointed at his wife's temple.

"Johnny, what are you doing?" Sheila began to struggle, her look of shock giving way to one of terror.

He cursed her in Arabic and tightened his grip on her throat.

"Be still, unless you want your brain splattered at his feet."

"What are you doing?" Eric repeated with incomprehension. He took a step toward them. The warning in the Arab's dark eyes made him hesitate.

"Listen to me, Doctor Tenisan. Unless you tell me where you found the talisman that hangs around your neck, I will shoot your lovely wife through the head. Do you understand?"

Eric could do nothing but stare.

Azotha pressed the barrel of the automatic into Sheila's hair just above her ear and put his finger gently on the trigger.

In a numb voice Eric began to describe his childhood memory. Azotha questioned him on the details and made him describe the knobs on the octagonal pedestal several times.

"I know this black stone," he said. "You have done the right thing, Dr. Tenisan. Now give me the talisman. Throw it to me."

"Yes, of course, only don't injure my wife."

He undid the chain around his neck and slid the medallion off it, then let the chain fall to the stone beside his shoe. He threw the gold disk in a careful underhand motion to Azotha, who caught it without loosening his grip on the woman.

"If you wanted to steal the medallion, why didn't you just tell me? It's not worth the safety of my wife."

An expression of anger clouded Azotha's features.

"Do you think me a common thief? I could have taken the talisman from you in Cairo. The talisman is useless without a knowledge of where you got it. My family searched for its hiding place for centuries, and you, a foolish child, stumble across it one night by some wild stroke of luck and use it for jewelry."

The contempt in Azotha's voice was palpable. As he talked, he relaxed his grip on Sheila's throat. She straightened, her face no longer afraid, but strangely calm.

“You cannot begin to comprehend the power I hold in my hand,” Azotha continued. “My family is descended from the race that built that city below us. They worshipped a god of the ocean deeps that came from a distant star. They built their city at the base of this great thing we are standing on, what you call a wall. But it is not a wall, it is a portal, and this is its key.”

“You expect me to believe that you are descended from the people of Asshur-sin?”

“Asshur-sin was not of my people. He was the king who conquered this valley, overthrew its city, and had thousands of tons of stone and sand piled up against this portal to prevent it ever being opened again. He thought he had slain all my race, but a few survived. They managed to drug his food, and after he was laid to rest in his white sepulcher they came in the night and carried off his still-living body and committed abominable rites over it to insure that he would walk the pathways of hell for eternity. And so he walks in hell to this day.”

Eric paid little attention to the fantasy of this insane Arab. He watched his wife. Her eyes smoldered with a suppressed excitement that was almost exultation.

“Sheila, come over here,” he murmured. “Stand behind me.”

She laughed, her voice pitiless.

“I told you my New England ancestors were sea traders. They had many dealings with barbarous tribes in foreign lands. In the South Pacific they made a bargain with a race of islanders who worshipped a god of the sea, and in return the sea yielded up its treasures to them, making them wealthy and powerful.”

“Sheila, what are you saying?”

She slid her arm around Azotha’s waist.

“Isn’t that obvious, you old fool? Johnny and I worship the same gods.”

Azotha raised the automatic and shot Eric in the head.

9.

WHEN ERIC REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, IT WAS NIGHT. He lay with his left cheek in a pool of his own dried blood. It looked black under the silvery rays of the full moon. He pushed himself into a sitting posture and gingerly felt his scalp with his fingers. The bullet had entered the skin above his left eye at the hairline and had run around the surface of his skull to exit from the back of his head. His entire head throbbed with pain.

Faintly, above the rhythmic thunder of the waves, he caught the sound of voices chanting in an unknown language. It was a man and a woman—Azotha and Sheila. The walls of the valley acted as a natural amphitheater, and the desert air was incredibly still, enabling the sounds to travel to the top of the Wall. Or was it a portal, as Azotha had so confidently claimed? Could a true history be conveyed through the generations of a single family for so many centuries? Eric dismissed the notion. Azotha was mad, and so apparently was his own wife. Yet something stirred in his subconscious, impelling him to stand and stumble toward the nearer of the two ramps, the one in the north by which Azotha had ascended.

As he made his way down the reticulated ramp, his mind began to clear, and his steps became more sure. The cool night air revived him. The chanting continued, rising and falling in intensity. Eric became aware of a change in the stones beneath his shoes. They began to ripple as though under the influence of a small earthquake. A faint humming, so deep that it was almost below the level of human hearing, raised the hairs along the back of his neck. It was as if the stones were responding to the chant with a song of their own. And beneath all this there was a lower vibration, a series of booms with long intervals of silence between, like the slow, deliberate footfalls of a giant.

He left the bottom of the ramp and ran across the desert sand to where the Rover was parked. Not far from it sat Azotha's rented car, partially concealed behind a decaying wall of one of the outlying city ruins. Eric stopped, an internal battle of wills raging within him. He knew that the wise

course would be to jump into the Rover and drive away from the valley before Azotha or Sheila could move to stop him. They had tried to murder him once and would not hesitate to try again. He started slowly toward the Rover. An invisible force descended on his limbs and held him still. An intelligence of great power spoke within him below the level of words, but intuitively he understood. He must stop the Arab and his wife from finishing the ritual.

He remembered this silent voice. It had spoken to him five decades ago, when he had run from the city and climbed the Wall with the medallion clutched in his fist. He had been powerless to disobey. He felt the same acquiescence within his soul he had experienced then. It was not a surrender but an acknowledgment of a higher wisdom and a superior will.

As he began to jog across the uneven sands and loose stones of the desert, his eyes downcast to guard against a stumble, the chanting abruptly ceased. There was silence except for his gasping breath and the dull, slow booms that seemed to emanate from the depths of the earth. Then the voices of Azotha and Sheila began to cry out in unison a single repeated barbarous word of evocation. Eric recognized it as one of the words his wife had uttered earlier.

“Kthulhu, Kthulhu, Kthulhu ...”

He stopped and stood bent in half with his elbows resting on his knees as he struggled to regain his breath. At sixty-seven, he was too old for moonlit sprints across the desert. He spat the taste of blood from his mouth and straightened. An instinct caused him to turn around, and the sight that met his gaze made him quail inwardly.

The lower two-thirds of the Wall had become transparent. In the center of this glassy expanse turned a vast spiral wheel of radiating energy that was a sickly green in color. It was not the spiral wheel of force that horrified him, but what lay beyond. By the penetrating light of the moon he could see through the stones of the Wall and into the dark waters on the other side. Shadow-shapes moved through that water, large shapes. Their outlines did not resemble anything Eric had ever seen. Deeper still, beyond these restless shadows, something vast and hideous approached on slow serpentine limbs. As it dragged itself forward, it emitted a dull boom each time its bulk settled to the sea floor.

How Eric could see such things in the darkness, how he could distinguish the shape of the approaching horror through countless meters of water, he made no attempt to understand. In some way he knew that what he saw was true, that his eyes were being assisted to penetrate the distance and gloom of the ocean depths, and more than this, that what he saw was not merely present in the deeps of the sea but also existed on some plane of reality that had been merged with the earthly plane by the chanted words. Azotha and his wife truly were insane, for they intended to open the Wall wide enough to allow that lumbering thing to enter this world.

The shouted evocation abruptly ceased. For a few seconds there was silence, then screams split the night. They came from human throats, but so great was the terror of those who made them that they sounded like the cries of pain-maddened beasts. The screams multiplied on the night breeze and ascended in pitch.

Eric began to run toward the nameless city, careless of where he put his feet. It was impossible to believe that such cries could continue for more than moments, but they went on and on. He thought of the face of his wife and felt sick. One of the voices was hers. The other sounded like that of Azotha, but was so shrill it might have been the screams of a young girl.

Long before he reached the outskirts of the ruins the screaming stopped. He approached the stones with cautious steps, struggling to catch his breath. The walls of the ruined structures came no higher than his waist in this portion of the city. He was able to look across the irregular rectangles of foundation stones that had once defined the houses of the ancient race of the valley. The ruins were utterly deserted. Conscious that Azotha might be crouching behind any corner waiting to put a bullet in his heart, Eric made his way down the broad central street toward the plaza of the black stone.

The plaza stood empty. He swept his gaze past two low shadows near the base of the pedestal stone, seeking any sign of his wife. As he crept toward the stone, alert for the lurking Azotha, the shadows defined themselves, and he recognized the bodies of human beings. Each naked corpse was completely covered in blood. No, he corrected himself, they were not covered in blood, but made of blood, along with glistening organs and exposed bones. Both bodies had been stripped of their skins. The wet blood appeared black in the moonlight.

10.

ERIC PUT ONE HAND ON THE OCTAGONAL STONE TO steady himself as he stared down at the female body. Just in time he turned his head and vomited sour liquid over the plaza. The booms from behind the gate continued to increase in force. His mind numb, he allowed the sounds to draw his gaze. The green spiral had not diminished with the cessation of the chant. If anything, it was larger and revolved with greater urgency. Through its translucent rays he saw the shadow outline of the vast thing more clearly. It was closer to the Wall. Not the Wall, he corrected himself, the portal. The opened portal.

A gleam of gold caught his eye. The wheel of his medallion rested in the center of the pedestal stone, exactly as he remembered seeing it in his boyhood memory. It was even oriented to the moon in the same way. He fumbled to pick it up. It adhered to the stone as though magnetized. When at last he pried it loose with his fingernails, a blue spark crackled between the medallion and the pedestal. At the same moment a trilling cry arose from deeper in the ruins of the city on the eastern side of the plaza. The walls were higher there, blocking his view, but the cry had not been human.

As though in response, from beyond the swirling portal issued a subsonic rumble that Eric felt in his chest rather than heard with his ears. The sheer fury of the sound compelled his attention, and he saw the spiral eye on the transparent stones begin to close. In the dozen seconds he stood mesmerized by the sight, it dimmed and shrank.

Behind him the trilling he had heard earlier was repeated. A second trilling arose from another part of the ruins, followed by a strange sifting and grinding noise, as though heavy cables were being dragged along a beach.

Eric became aware of his danger. He bent his head and ranged back and forth across the plaza, searching for Azotha's automatic. Eventually he found it, some dozen meters from the corpse of the Arab. The hammer was cocked, with a round in the chamber and the safety catch off. Why had Azotha not fired to defend himself and Sheila from their attacker? The

image of the terror of his nightmares returned to him with photographic clarity. At the last the dark man's courage had failed him. Or maybe he refused to fire upon the emissaries of his god. The sandy grinding did not cease, but drew relentlessly closer. It came from two places in the depths of the ancient city. He peered into the ruins and saw a shadow pass over the stones of a crumbling house wall, but the thing that made it was still obscured.

Eric did not wait to have his terror confirmed. With the gun in his right hand and the medallion clutched in his left, he ran wildly down the valley toward the Rover. The full moon hung in the west above the Wall and lit his way, but in spite of this advantage Eric was soon forced to slow his pace to little more than a fast walk. The race up the incline of the valley floor to the city had left him utterly exhausted. His head throbbed and his eyes blurred, so that he found it difficult to keep his balance. The trilling sounded behind his left shoulder and was answered from somewhere further back to the right. The sifting noise did not get nearer, but neither did it fall behind. In the still night air it was impossible to tell the distance that separated him from his closest pursuer.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. The strength drained from his legs and caused him to collapse to his hands and knees on the hard stones. It was not just the horror of the following things, but their familiarity. They were the nightmares of his youth, returned to haunt him, as they had haunted his sleep all the days of his adult life. Every night he ran from them, and every morning he blocked them from his memory.

A ring of short, thick tentacles around its base provided the creature with locomotion across the desert. It was from these that the grinding and sifting emanated. From its apex writhed longer and more slender members that reminded Eric of a cluster of vipers with their tails tied together. Some of the snake-like appendages had black barbs on their ends resembling the curved, black legs of insects. These dripped with fluid that was flung off from them as they writhed, so that it scattered through the moonlight like milky pearls. Along the lengths of these upper tentacles were reddish-black hooks that resembled curved thorns. It was not difficult to imagine what had stripped the clothing and skin from the living bodies of his wife and the dark man.

Just beneath the serpentine crown of the creature were three black eyes, equally spaced around the circumference of its body. As it rocked from side to side over the loose stones, the trailing eyes came alternately into view for an instant, but it was the central orb that held Eric's attention. It glared at the fallen man with an unmistakable malice. The second monster was like the first. It had remained further back and ranged to the right, as though seeking to block his escape should he choose to flee along the road and up the pass between the mountains.

He pushed himself to his feet without realizing that he had fallen. The gun was gone, lost amid the shadows, but the medallion remained in his closed fist. In the seconds it took him to get up, the nearest of the creatures closed almost half the distance that separated it from its prey. He turned and ran on. The nightmare repeated itself. Simultaneously, he was a terrified seventeen-year-old and an old man grieving for his lost innocence. With some part of his mind he realized the spiral vortex of the dimensional portal had vanished. The transparency of the black stones also began to fade. The bright circle of the moon kissed the top of the great barrier and slipped into the waters beyond as he ran beneath the black shadow of the Wall.

He rounded the rear bumper of the Rover and jerked the driver-side door open. Even as he reached for the key in the lock, some instinct warned him that it would not be there. He fumbled over the steering column and then across the floor mats. He remembered leaving the key inserted. It had to be there. In the moonless shadow, the noise of the approaching horror was deafening. He could not see it, but he could feel its nearness. The truth struck him at the same instant he rolled from the driver's seat and ran toward the dark bulk of the other vehicle. Azotha had removed the key, probably at the time of his arrival, to insure that he would not drive away while Azotha was still climbing the ramps.

The car was unlocked, but no key rested in its steering column. He felt along the dashboard and over the passenger seat, then turned down the sun visors, praying that a spare might be tucked behind them. He cursed. The keys for both vehicles must be in the plaza of the ruined city, lying amid the fragments of clothing that surrounded the skinless bodies of his wife and her accomplice. As he spun out of the car, a metallic rasp indicated that the thing following so close behind had slid one of its barbed tentacles over the

metal of the Rover's body. It sounded remarkably similar to fingernails dragged across a blackboard by a malicious child.

For an instant Eric considered trying to slip past the monster in the darkness of the lunar shadow and making his way back toward the pass that was the only egress from the valley. But the trilling of the second creature came from directly between where he stood and the way to safety. He did not even consider that this might be an accident. These things could not have known about the keys, but they had no intention of allowing their human prey to outflank them. In any case, he had little reason to suppose that the nearer of the beings was blinded by the darkness.

A barbed tentacle lashed out and struck the opened door of Azotha's car with a harsh clang, not more than three paces from where Eric stood. The immediacy of his danger galvanized him. He ran in the opposite direction, toward the base of the northern ramp. His eyes had become accustomed to the almost total darkness in the Wall's shadow, so he was able to keep his feet and stay ahead of the pursuing nightmare. He thought of casting the medallion onto the ground behind him, but some guiding awareness not his own made him keep it tightly pressed in his left fist. Again came the uncanny feeling of *déjà vu*, the certainty that he had experienced an identical impulse to cast the medallion aside, and received the same directive not to do so, on the night of its discovery five decades ago.

He was able to climb the first in the series of ramps only by putting his hands against his knees and pressing down with each step. His legs trembled and burned. Each weighed as much as the stones he climbed. At one point he managed to laugh bitterly when he realized why the Wall was ascended by inclines rather than stairs. It had not been constructed for human feet, but for the stubby, ambulatory tentacles of the monsters. Had he come to this realization in the security of his university flat, surrounded by his books and papers, it would have been the crowning achievement of his career; but now it merely mocked his ignorance.

He had researched the valley of Asshur-sin for five decades and had learned nothing of importance. All the while he had kept some of the answers suppressed just beyond his reach in his own memories. His young wife had known more about the Wall than he had learned in all his years of research. So had Johnny Azotha. With agonizing clarity he realized what a fool he had been.

The trilling only two ramps below him was answered by an identical trill that echoed from the rocky slope on the opposite side of the Wall. The other creature had moved quickly to cut off his escape. There would be no chance to cross the causeway and descend by the southern ramps. It was exactly as it had been on that night, so long ago, when he had fled similar beings. How had he escaped that night? Eric racked his memory as he fought his way up the endless reticulated incline, but the final part of that night of terror remained as hidden as the face of the moon.

Three deaths awaited him at the top, should he retain enough strength in his legs to reach it. One lay on the hard stones at the base of the Wall so far below. The other was wrapped in the chill, choking waves of the ocean. The third hung on the barbs and hooks of the tentacles of the dread guardians of this passage to the underworld. Three ways of death, and perhaps a single way of salvation, if only he could remember.

11.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED MORE THAN A LIFETIME, HE crawled on his hands and knees from the final ramp to the level stones of the causeway. It was almost more than he could bear to force his bruised and bloody knees to straighten and hold him erect. How long he had crawled, he did not remember, but it could not have been more than a few of the ramps or the creature would have caught him. It was close behind. The moon had just set below the horizon of the ocean in the west. An eerie phosphorescence illuminated the waves as they struck the side of the Wall. The stars had begun to pale overhead, indicating that morning was not far away. He wasted a moment to glance at the eastern mountains and saw the rose-gray tint of approaching dawn.

Hope surged in his heart. At last he remembered the final minutes of that night, so long ago. Swaying, he staggered on stiff legs from the horror that tipped itself upright onto the top of the causeway, so close behind. If only he could stay in front of it, he had a chance of survival. But the thing moved faster on a level surface than it had on the sloping ramps, and faster still across the smooth stones than on the rocky valley floor. It seemed to sense his thoughts, for it increased its speed. Had he stumbled, he would never have risen again. The smooth stones that speeded the hellish thing behind were his own blessing. He was able to drag his nerveless feet across their surface without catching his toes or heels. Somehow he managed to keep his balance.

As he neared the center he heard an exultant trilling in front of him. The other creature has finished its ascent and now barred his path. He continued to shuffle toward it. There was nowhere else to go. As it approached, he had more opportunity than he wished to examine its writhing, hooked appendages and leathery body. He dared not look away for fear of losing his balance and sprawling on his face. The thing behind was very close. He heard the barbs of its tentacles click against the stone just behind his heels.

Finally, there was nowhere else to run. Eric turned and stared defiance into the lidless black central eye of the monster that followed. A strange peace descended into his body, as though a cooling cloak of silk had been draped across his skin. Fear left him. He felt a sense of recognition for the horror that closed swiftly upon him with its barbed ropes lashing the air. He saw it, not with his own eyes, but with the eyes of an older and wiser soul that had in some inexplicable way merged with his own. The monster abruptly stopped and appeared indecisive. Eric knew that by some psychic faculty it had perceived the same presence within him.

It was this possessing presence, not Eric, that passed the medallion into his right hand and threw it far out over the waves. It vanished from view against the paling stars while in the air, but as it struck the water it cast up a small splash of luminous white.

Eric experienced a rush of liberation. A debt had been paid. An obligation had been fulfilled. Calmly he turned to face the nearer of the tentacled things and awaited his own death.

Even as the creature glared malignancy and thrust itself forward for the killing lash, a ray of the rising sun struck its tortuous crown. At once its leathery body became transparent, just as the stones of the gate had become transparent under the moonlight. It writhed in a frenzy of frustration and threw itself forward on its stubby, squamous legs. Eric closed his eyes. He felt a tingling on his skin. He opened his eyelids with surprise, then turned. The monster has passed completely through his body, as though it were no more than a projection of light.

The two creatures came together and stopped. They seemed to converse. Eric heard their trilling voices, which sounded strangely remote, as though they came from many miles away. Under the strengthening rays of the sun their bodies faded and became as clear as glass, and within a few moments more, they vanished.

Eric blinked at the sun. He was too numb to feel emotion, but he knew the ordeal had ended. The things had disappeared into whatever dimension of reality had spawned them, the same way they had faded into nothingness on the morning of that night so many decades ago. The destiny of his life, so long postponed, was at last fulfilled. Later there would be time to reflect on the meaning of what had taken place, time to grieve for the death of his wife and to ponder her hidden purposes, time to piece together the bits of

information he had gleaned from his own memories and from Azotha's words, but for the present he merely enjoyed the sunrise.

Behind him, a sinuous rope of gray flesh as thick as his waist rose silently from the waves. It wrapped around him in a gentle coil, as though embracing a lover, and with a smooth arc slipped beneath the surface of the sea. Where it passed, the stones were empty. Ripples spread from the place of its descent, but soon the waves erased this brief memorial.

Fear Lurks Atop Tempest Mount

(After H. P. Lovecraft's "The Lurking Fear")

CHARLES LOVECRAFT

Charles Lovecraft, an Australian writer who legally changed his name to reflect his devotion to the dreamer from Providence, started writing in 1975, after encountering the works of H. P. Lovecraft. In 2007 he created P'rea Press, to publish weird and fantastic poetry, nonfiction, and bibliography. He has published one and edited fourteen books to date. Charles has seen his verse published in Eldritch Tales, Fantasy Tales, Pablo Lennis, Eye to the Telescope, Cthulhu Haiku, Buzzkill: Apocalypse, The Poet's Press, and Weird Fiction Review.

I. THE SHADOW ON THE CHIMNEY

It thundered mad the night I went atop
Old Tempest Mount to seek the lurking fear.
The lurking fear—what foul name dares adhere
To elder devilry inbred, to hop
And taint to blackest heights that mountain top.
So I took two stout men with me to steer
A path through all delusion wrought so queer,
And to weird rumours and mad fearings crop.

We slept, each side by side, with guns, and watched
A shadow on a chimney that was cast
By fulminating rod of lightning blast.
Those men were never seen again, hope scotched.
I wish to God I'd never set foot there,
Or climbed upon old Tempest's stony stare.

II. A CONNOISSEUR IN HORRORS (THE SEARCH FOR REASONS WHY)

The hellish mountain wore a crown of snake.
Medusa of the skies, its lightnings formed
And wriggled fiendishly in clouds and stormed
Dilated dread to wider counties' sake.
The soul cried out to cleanse and great steps take
To fully extirpate that fame deformed,

And to recalibrate the earth that swarmed,
To that which had been lost, mud's slimy wake.

Still other chat suggested shocking eyes'
Opposing colours—blue and brown—and sere
Beliefs, such as the thunder called the fear
And set it loose amongst the night's red cries
Of satanism from dark centuries past.
Possessed poor devils shuddered all aghast.

III.

A PASSER IN THE STORM

My studies in the outré and the weird
Were always problematical for me.
One never quite knew when to stop, or free
The genii of the madness from its beard.
And yet there was a friend of mine who shared
These diabolical pursuits. Thus he
It was who came with me to that high scree—
Though neither was prepared for that which neared.

In cabin broken down the door had skewed.
We paused, to keep out of the rain. But I
Am all to blame for his demise, and sigh.
I went there with a man whose head was chewed
And gouged so silently on windowsill.
That face ... licked clean ... I see it clearly still.

IV.

WHAT THE RED GLARE MEANT

The portals of red danger soon were thrown.
The night was filled calamitous with sound,
For nightmare now had trumped and I was bound;
And hard beneath my feet the mountain stone.
I had to spare all else and went alone,
And digged there frantically 'neath slab and mound.
At last in graveyard pit I fell through ground;
A tunnel led away through a hacked zone.

I loped on when, engulfed in black, two dots
That *glared*, shone out red points of Hell from my
Cold, dying torch. The thing moved fast. Just by,
Through ruddy skeins of rotted earth, wild shots
Of lightning lampion leapt and killed it there.
But God—did this mean more than one lurked here?

V. EARLIER GRISLY DISCOVERIES

The woods around the Martense mansion bent
Bestowed no sense of safeness, but a well
Of seething fears whose viciousness could swell
Upon the stories of dead bodies rent.
I walked along, mid musty, bestial scent,
And tripped on loathsome bloated wood and fell.
Weird roots engorged with overflowing hell
Fed fat from an unwholesome nourishment.

With an acute and an uncanny fear
I searched environs made of pits and holes,
And trees loomed large with gnarled and twisted boles
As, blindly in the gathering dark, to steer
Now heedless of my own self's health, I set
To find the pinnacle where all Hell met.

VI.

A MOUNTAIN'S GHASTLY FAME

I started, from a voice of thunder's sound.
Its timbre growled and called on *what* at last?
I knew it blackly summoned, what—*repast*?
I heard it call. My heart could only pound,
And even the mere breath I barely found.
In all the world my soul was set to blast
All my emotions dead, and chill fear cast
An acid dashed in face, a fuming mound.

The growing fear now gouged my mind with mark
Of Cain, the ken of knowing far too much
In that black pit, as, stirring from a hutch,
There waddled something forth, a something dark.
I'd *found the nightmare creeping death* and paled
As silent abnormalities assailed.

VII.

FORMLESS PHANTASMS —THE DEMON LURKING FEAR

Oarless into a blighted sea I flowed.
I'd dumbly come to seek uncanny fame—
Now my own mental dissolution came.
We are not helped. We each have sere coins sewed
On lips and eyes and that to time are owed.
For all I now beheld I was to blame.
The thing had chewed and gouged, and now it came
And in the frightful lurking cellar crowed.

It was a thing beyond all sanity—

A slithering, rat-like scurrying, a hazy
Genetic wrongfulness, a nameless, crazy
Tearing thing, scratching out the mind's lost eye.
I merely shuddered then, as wave on wave
Of horror pounded on me to the grave.

VIII.

AN ACHERON OF MULTIFORM DIABOLISM

The thing was spawn of Hell, a nauseous flood
Of stinking froth, a schume that overran
All sense of peace and jaded godly plan.
Anon, distended bits now wrenched fresh blood;
Still other claws detached from the black brood
And hideously stalked the weaker clan;
Whereon its horde of demon brother, cousin,
Fiend, set upon and ate, with jaw lines crude.

Delirious with all that is unclean
In this black universe—the charnel heart
Of this dark cosmic plane to tear apart
With rabid jaws and teeth those dear I'd seen—
I knew that I would never more retain
The sense of simple safety, or be sane.

IX.

THE HORROR IN THE EYES

There broke loose all the storm of horror come—
A demon scratching slithering, a night-
Spawn of diseased and nameless panic fright.
My God, there must have thousands been of them,

As there, behind a desiccated scum
Of shrub by which I hid and by the light
Of lightning bolts that struck a thicket blight,
The straggler that loped last had now come home.

The voice of alien thunders loudly burst
But I was merely gored there to the spot,
And even as the thing devoured I shot
It dead as a great squeal of lightning cursed;
And now I just recall the look of it
As it died there—*blue-brown eyes from the pit.*

X.

A NETHER WORLD OF UNKNOWN NIGHTMARE

A red glare flashed in fulminant far glow,
And my poor mind was left embanked behind.
That bank was empty of all cash—sane mind—
And I was merely ready for dice throw,
With no collateral that I might view.
As with the gods the fates are never kind
But only to their wheel of Ixion bind
The hapless fool no matter his IQ.

For now in that black cellar poured the ire
Of all mankind, the remnant of the darks
Of maddened mountain-tops. Dual-coloured sparks
Of eyes there swarmed to ghoulishly conspire.
Six shots rang out, revolver's rapid burst,
At stewing leprous legions here accursed.

XI.

THE INEFFABLE HORROR OF IT ALL —THE MOUND-BURROWS

The house is gone, praise God, and those things dead,
The ghoulish vegetations, eerie weeds—
One can but postulate on what foul deeds
Those swollen nameless things had long been fed—
The gored, gnarled face *of fear and shapeless dread*.
The roots that once groped round in rabid greeds
The mansion of Martense now curl their breeds
Of over nourishment on other bread.

And scurrying seething abnormalities?
They—one can only hope—were killed when house
And mountain-top alike were blown to humus
By detonations' wildest savageries,
Enhanced to workmanlike degree of fate,
To seal off those mound-burrows' lurking *hate*.

XII. FROM PITS REMOTE AND UNIMAGINABLE

The fattened, baleful trees that circled round
The mansion of Martense in knotted roots,
In ganglias of horror whose black shoots
Sought out unhealthy nourishments, were found
In an acute, uncanny meaning bound—
In total lack through moonless nights of hoots
Of owl, or bird to screech from blackened coots,
And only left a demon scratching sound.

For life itself now causes me regret.
The fear has gouged my face with untold mark
From rat-like, creeping vermin of the dark,

And from that other thing I shan't forget—
When I saw face to face without defence
Those devil cannibals of Jan Martense.



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.sk

z-lib.gs

z-lib.fm

go-to-library.sk



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>